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## Leeched Stories, Layered Selves: Appropriating Narratives and Finding Voice in El Salvador

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LEECHED STORIES, LAYERED SELVES: APPROPRIATING NARRATIVES AND  
FINDING VOICE IN EL SALVADOR

by

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A THESIS

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LEECHED STORIES, LAYERED SELVES: APPROPRIATING NARRATIVES AND  
FINDING VOICE IN EL SALVADOR

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Issues of shifting identity, border crossing, and layered systems of power have long been discussed and examined by scholars of Chicano/a and queer theory. This collection of creative nonfiction essays gives a personal, anecdotal perspective on those themes. The essays narrate the story of the U.S.-born author and her Salvadorian husband who is applying for his permanent residency in the United States. As the author travels to and from El Salvador, she contemplates her own positions of power and the problems of appropriating narratives of those outside of her community. In addition, as she learns her husband's stories and the history of his country, she finds that her own identity and stories become more complex and hybrid. Even as she enters the narratives of others, she too is touched and transformed.



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## Strategic Shifting, Self-Conscious Shaping: Hybrid Identity and Power Positions in Writing across Borders

For the past six years, I have found myself, my identity and voice, in a state of flux and growth—an awkward stage of changes that has been difficult to understand and control. This time in my life has been one of increased border crossing, of *choques* and negotiations between and among layered positions of power in foreign situations. Through my relationship with my husband Noé, I have learned about his country of El Salvador, about the complicated process of immigration in the U.S., and about ways in which my identity changes as I move across geographic borders into new territories. As Noé and I have gone to and from El Salvador to apply and wait for his permanent residency in the U.S., I have often been confronted with unfamiliar stories, and forced to acknowledge my transparent position of privileged Other in a community that is not my own. This fluctuation of identity, which is at times confusing and challenging, has nevertheless been one that has caused growth and enrichment. Increased investigation and innovation have caused me to explore and become comfortable with new modes of story-telling and new kinds of stories.

Issues of identity, the ownership and interpretation of outside stories, and the art of flexibly moving through systems of power permeate these narratives. And yet these themes are not new. While they have risen out of my own lived experiences, they have been acknowledged and examined by other authors—particularly Chicano/a theorists and Latin American men and women who have also moved between different worlds and identities. These are voices that create a textual community for me that both complicates

and enriches my work. But even so, at their core, the essays in this collection are about real people and places that exist in an extratextual world. They have been appropriated here, placed into narratives that I can understand. But I hope that they have been self-consciously used and transformed and that some of the truths discovered and created here will challenge and transform other narratives we might, more often, tell ourselves.

Perhaps one of the most difficult issues for me to appreciate and utilize during the crafting of these essays had to do with identities and voices—those of the narrators who tell the stories of a reimagined past. In fact, as a nonfiction writer, one of my biggest challenges was finding narrative voices that would be able to effectively make meaning of the events that happened to me and of a “real-life” identity that seemed increasingly multifaceted and complex. My narrative identity, influenced greatly by connection with different voices, continues to undergo painful development and growth.

In *The Man Made of Words*, N. Scott Momaday tells the story of a Native American man, Plenty Horses, who lived part of his life in a white boarding school. When he returned to his community after years of separation, he found himself an exile. Momaday writes that Plenty Horses was no longer able to speak his native language fluently and, because he had also failed to master English, his “voice was broken,” his very being “thrown away” (103). Although the situation of Plenty Horses was one riddled with distinct problems of power and dominance, I too can understand the difficulty of living inadequately, not just between languages, but between different modes of telling, and voices.

Six years ago, long before I began this project and before I lived in El Salvador, I was a younger writer of fiction who had lived my life in one location—Nebraska—and

who operated in one language—English. My “pre-contact” narrative voice had a simple stability untroubled by multiplicity and doubt. After I graduated from the university, I took a few years off from school. I worked as an ESL teacher, met my Salvadorian husband Noé, and traveled to Ecuador to learn Spanish. I did very little writing during that time. And so, when I attempted, after years of listening to diverse narratives, and after years of silence on the page, to begin writing again in graduate school, my voice felt broken, croaking in awkwardness like an adolescent’s.

As I began writing these essays, alternately I relied on old tactics of dry humor and distant narration and, at other times, I found that these tools failed me as I attempted to describe my husband’s family in El Salvador, a desperation and poverty that was foreign to me and in which I could not find the old humor. As a result, my narrative voice in essays faltered and shifted uncomfortably between tones and distance. Perhaps as Vivian Gornick writes in her book *The Situation and the Story*, “the problem was I never knew who was telling the story” (20). My own extratextual identity that changed and fluctuated was reflected on the page in an unstable, wavering voice.

However, rather than conclude with Momaday that such a voice negated my ability to be, and that I existed as a writer who was “thrown away,” who was doomed to ineffectively narrate stories “between two worlds, without a place in either,” I took comfort in the literature of Chicano/a theorists who celebrated notions of hybridity and its capacity to enrich language and complicate narratives (Momaday 103). In her work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa famously celebrates the multiple languages that make up her being. She points out that language is “living,” and discusses stories as “acts encapsulated in time, ‘enacted’ every time they are spoken



aloud or read silently. [They are] performances and not...inert and ‘dead’ objects” (77, 89). Anzaldúa’s emphasis on performance is useful and encouraging. As writers, we have many different stories and can therefore strategically foreground distinct aspects of our voices and identities. Just as stories change, so do the voices who tell them. As Gornick puts it, great writers have not only “been possessed of an insight that organized the writing,” but have created a “persona...to serve that insight” (23). Thus, Anzaldúa and Gornick both acknowledge flexibility in writing, a theatrical putting on of masks.

In addition, Anzaldúa opens up a middle space for languages, an in-between location in which voices are fluid and switch between spaces and cultures to recreate, complicate, and destabilize old narratives. The diverse and living Chicano/a language is a reflection of this fluidity. Drawing inspiration from Anzaldúa’s theory as well as from authors like Sandra Cisneros who incorporate both Spanish and English in their texts, I have allowed myself to acknowledge a double identity.

During my writing, when I searched at times for an English expression, a Spanish word or phrase came to mind. I had to reach across languages as needed, pulling in pieces to fill in gaps or to increase precision. Spanish words and ideas have now lodged themselves in my brain and disrupted a formerly-stable language structure. I have allowed these bits of Spanish to exist in my stories, sometimes as no more than small pieces. For example, my essay titles “Stuttering in *Clavazones*,” “*Descarada*,” and “When it Touches You” clearly appropriate terms and sayings from a Salvadorian community—sayings that have helped me understand my experiences within that community. Just as Cisneros alternately translates and leaves phrases in Spanish as titles

for chapters in *Caramelo*, I have also allowed the language in my essays to be hybridized—something that I have found increasingly subconscious and intuitive.

While I still struggle greatly with inconsistent voice and tone, I have learned that this inconsistency is part of growth and that it precedes a rich complexity I did not formerly possess. Writing these essays has been, in part, an experiment with these different voices. Among these different essays, I find different versions of myself. For instance, in “The Hills We Die On,” my voice is academic, contemplative, and leaves room for poetic distance. Perhaps this is because this particular essay does in fact discuss distance, a misunderstanding of what is Other to my experience. However, in “Stuttering in *Clavazones*,” I much more deliberately access my “old,” familiar voice. It is dry and funny and it reflects my relationship with a familiar past. And yet none of these essays remains completely untouched by life in another culture. In fact, almost all of them contain some amount of Spanish and reflect my interaction with a second language. This language and culture have become so much a part of me that I cannot seem to extract them entirely from narratives, even if those narratives are about an English-dominated past.

As I navigate through fluctuating identities, I have come to understand the difference between what Sue William Silverman calls the “Voice of Experience” and the “Voice of Innocence” (50). While, “the Voice of Innocence reveals the raw, not-yet-understood emotions associated with the story’s action...the Voice of Experience...interprets or reflects upon the events” (50, 51). In the interests of consistency and meaning-making, I must, in revision, separate the two. And so, I tend to think of my Voice of Innocence as erratic, changing unpredictably in a natural, knee-jerk

response to events—a response that is not always logical or effective. My Voice of Experience, however, while it can also at times be fluid, must maintain a degree of stability, and change only in *strategic* moves that allow truths to be uncovered. My hope is that these essays reflect only the most thoughtful and deliberate changes of voice and tone.

However, in addition to issues of identity and voice, I also dealt with the problematic concern of appropriating individual and communal stories of the Other. As I listened to stories that fascinated me from El Salvador, particularly stories that Noé shared with me, I felt a need to process them and to find meanings from them. And yet these impulses of mine to appropriate, to shape stories that were not my own, were problematic and, I realized, could even represent a new colonization of the Other. As I wrote these essays, then, Edén Torres’ condemnation of “a selfish hunger to consume difference” and “the need [of the dominant culture] for the exotic Other,” rang constantly in my mind (123, 125). Aware of my own love of difference and my fascination with stories that were distinct from my own, I attempted to be particularly self-conscious about my position as a story-teller—as a leech of tales.

One way of dealing with a tendency towards appropriation was dealt with by foregrounding my own narratives, my own history and stories. I did this especially in “Stuttering in *Clavazones*” and “*Descarada*.” My hope was that the anecdotes in these essays that draw on my past would serve to situate me as a middle-class white woman from Lincoln, Nebraska, whose knowledge was often confused and limited. Also, to help further expose my power position, I attempted to connect myself with other characters who reflect equal amounts of naïveté and confidence. For example, in “When it Touches

You,” I compared myself with another character, Jessica, who is from the Midwest and exhibits attitudes of privilege.

However, I most explicitly dealt with issues of appropriation in the essay that is titled “A Leech of Tales.” This essay, rather than being a simple appropriation of the stories of the Other, strove to be *about* this problematic appropriation and to expose the tendency to create and romanticize myths. Part of my interest in doing this stemmed from Chicano/a theorist Emma Pérez’s self-conscious interactions with history. In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, she writes of the problematic inescapability of creating narratives about the past. Masking as historical “truth,” these narratives, neatly constructed by those in power, often ignore “that which is different, fragmented, imagined, non-linear, [and] non-teleological” (Pérez XIV). While Pérez is talking about history, this idea can also apply to personal stories. Perhaps one of the ways of dealing with a tendency to create narratives that we perceive as real is to acknowledge their status as imaginary and to self-consciously enter into narratives and then exit that space through a metatext that explains and challenges that tendency to narrate. Just as Emma Pérez enters history through fiction in her novel *Blood Memory*, I wanted to interact with Noé’s history through imagined stories in “A Leech of Tales.” This is why I identified his past as a series of *tales*—stories of exaggerated fiction that I liked to tell myself. I also surrounded these tales with narration that exposes the writer as a myth maker and that juxtaposes the tales with “real” life events experienced firsthand by the narrator.

Salvadorian writer Manlio Argueta interacts with history in much the same, self-conscious way. In his novel *Caperucita de la Zona Roja*, Argueta fragmentizes and mythologizes the civil war in El Salvador, identifying it with a well-known fairy tale—

Little Red Riding Hood. Here, he brings into question the very creation of history by using “metatextual, self-conscious” strategies (Caso 122). By connecting history with a fairytale, Argueta makes readers aware of the imaginary, constructed nature of both. This strategy invites an interrogation of historical narratives created and propagated by those in power. Although I did not deal with a nation’s history in “A Leech of Tales,” and while I did not fragment the narrative, I did connect the past with myth and, I believe, called into question the tendency to create narratives about the past in order to create meaning or, in my case, to create an alternate narrative—one that was apparently more fulfilling and exciting than my own.

And yet my appropriation of stories did not just exist at the individual level. Like Pérez and Argueta, I too had an interest in communal memory and historical narratives. Especially in the essay “The Hills We Die On,” I explored one such communal story, the history of civil war in El Salvador. Again, rather than writing this story about that war and my interpretation of it—instead of making it mine—I attempted to investigate the tendency to make false connections as an outsider by highlighting faulty interpretations and the distance that I felt as a foreigner in El Salvador. In short, I wrote about how that story never could be mine and could not be fully understood by me.

Perhaps my interest in exploring history from a different angle and challenging the assumption that Salvadorians’ apparent repression of history and deliberate forgetfulness are counterproductive, stemmed from my reading of Chicano/a theorist Chéla Sandoval who recognizes that oppressed peoples have an ability to read stories from a low position that allows them to see through masks and power systems. Because of an expert ability to deconstruct the metanarratives we tell ourselves about lives and

history, they are also uniquely prepared to create strategies for survival and resistance. In fact, Sandoval, who models her methods of resistance after ideologies adopted in the third world feminist movement, believes that moving differentially between ideologies can be useful for social change. That means that while, in the long run, historical amnesia in El Salvador may have negative effects, there also may be ways that it can self-consciously be appropriated by its citizens for peace. Thus, my contact with new, Salvadorian narratives complicated my own cherished values of confessing and revisiting history in order to heal community trauma. Instead, I had to entertain the notion that silence and even selective repression could perhaps be strategies for resistance.

I am not the only one to entertain this idea. One scholar on Central America Mo Hume also realizes that silence is “multi-layered, contradictory and complex...complicit with fear, threat and alienation...[but also] a tool for the subaltern who use silence as a strategy to negotiate and survive the hostile world around them” (17). She writes that even while these strategies of silence do not “encapsulate romanticized notions of what resistance might look like,” they can be “an evasive micro strategy of resistance” (89).

If, as Sandoval writes, enacting change “depends on the practitioner’s ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configuration, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples,” perhaps Salvadorians could benefit from silence and other strategies of resistance that, at first, may appear counterintuitive to outsiders (59).

Thus, a third major theme—that of navigating between and among power structures from below, one that is analyzed by Sandoval, is implicitly present in these essays. Throughout them, Noé most often represents a voice of experience, of one who

understands how to wear masks, how power works, and how to move flexibly and strategically through systems for survival. His respect for silence in “The Hills We Die On” is evidence of this. Also, Noé’s ability to read and understand power is clear in “When it Touches You.” Unlike Jessica and I who underestimate the power of government systems and the ineffectiveness and racism they are capable of displaying, Noé, his Salvadorian friend Gerardo, and even the more privileged Salvadorian Bea, expect the government to act in certain ways and are therefore more prepared to deal with the problems they anticipate.

And just as I am surprised by systems of power in “When it Touches You,” in my essay “*Descarada*” I discover that I am unprepared to understand and move through positions of power that are more layered and complex than I had imagined. Although as a white, U.S. citizen I am in a position of privilege in El Salvador, I am also a woman who is unfamiliar with gender expectations reflected in fashion codes, an unfamiliarity that at times undermines my privilege. As a woman, I experience a pressure to perform in El Salvador that feeds and resurrects latent insecurities from my past. My experience is mirrored in part, by that of Yohann, a French immigrant. He too struggles with understanding his complex identity in a new environment. Unlike us, however, Brenda, a Salvadorian woman, understands much more fully both the challenges and benefits of her class and gender positions in El Salvador.

Before I began to write, when I experienced these shifting positions of privilege as I crossed borders between the U.S. and El Salvador, I often found myself frustrated and disoriented. However, this project gave me the opportunity to slowly, from a distance, examine and interrogate these changing identities in a deep, enlightening way.

Working on these essays has proved both challenging and fruitful. It has allowed me to embrace polyvocality and hybridity and to expose my position as a privileged outsider in a deliberate way that makes meaning. It has also given me the opportunity to hone my craft as a writer, to move beyond the use of old tools, old voices. Admittedly, I still at times find my voice cracking, my interaction with different stories halting and tentative. And yet, I have begun to accept the faltering of my voice as an opportunity for growth, as evidence that with practice and control, that voice will become deeper and richer, strong enough to narrate stories that were once far out of my range, beyond my reach, across my borders.



## A Leech of Tales

I first saw Noé's neighborhood in a grainy satellite photo on the internet. To me, La Residencial Modelo looked like a series of square boxes surrounding a parking lot, but Noé could identify the tree that grew outside of what used to be his bedroom window and the hole that was an empty swimming pool. This distant, indistinct grid—Noé's old neighborhood—was my first glimpse of San Salvador. When I saw it, we were newly married, living in a one-bedroom apartment in Nebraska, and we knew that we would have to go there soon. Noé had applied for residency in the United States, and was scheduled for an interview at the U.S. embassy in El Salvador. We would have to live in his country for a time until everything was processed.

Through the window beside the computer where we struggled to decipher the photo, I could see my old high school, solid and looming. Its permanent shadow and the sound of the marching band that woke me up at six every morning reminded me that I had not come far in seven years. When I glanced at the reflection of the towering building—dominating the top corner of the computer screen, and darkening La Resi's empty pool—I felt that, even though I had graduated from the university, married, and gotten a job teaching English, in the end I had only spent the last years of my life shuffling slowly across the narrow street.

In Nebraska, Noé and I continued sluggishly through our daily routines, knowing that without papers, Noé's prospects for the future were limited. He was an illegal immigrant—he couldn't study, travel by plane, get a new job, or drive without fear of being pulled over and questioned. Our apartment, one of few where no social security

numbers were required, was tiny and unattractive with pipes that reeked and occasional infestations of bedbugs, but all of the other apartments seemed to have contracts with blanks we simply couldn't fill in. Noé had been shut out from a lot of the benefits he thought he would be able to enjoy when he left El Salvador promising friends and family he'd be back in two years owning numerous houses and fluent in English and French. But beyond the crushing disappointment of the present, here Noé was also barred from accessing the people and adventures of his past.

This, I think, was Noé's chief complaint, because he talked about it more than anything else. And I knew his complaints well because for a while I was paid to listen. Two years before we were married, Noé arrived at the ESL class I taught, often tired from seven days working on the roof, his round, baby face burnt by the wind. He told me that Lincoln was too quiet a town and that, when he couldn't sleep, he would walk around at night, waiting for a dog to bark, for someone to slip a knife into his back. He missed the place—his neighborhood, La Resi—where mortality was so close, people went crazy—tried to tempt it, seduce it, cheat it. These were people *pelada* who carried around pistols, slept with the wives of gang bosses, hired witches for *maldiciones*. Noé's stories appealed to me. Bored with the endless present, afraid that both of us had gotten stuck forever in the same city in the only apartment that would have us—I became a sort of parasite to his longing.

When Noé showed me La Resi on the computer, I focused on the image as evidence, as blurry hope that the world was big and that our lives stretched beyond the present. We squinted and zoomed in and out of the satellite photo together, Noé guiding me from box to box, from gray to green. Miniature lima beans might have been pickup

trucks or parks. Noé knew. Across the street from La Residencial Modelo was the national zoo. But for now it looked like nothing more than a blot of mold on the finger-smudged screen.

And aside from this satellite photo, all I had of La Resi, my only mode of transportation to Noé's past, were his stories—most of them filled with forbidden love, illicit sex, and violence. These were legends for me. I hungered for Noé's tales like a leech, sucking them from his tired lips as we lay in bed at night. Even when his words began slurring together with sleep, I made him finish telling me the stories, turning them over in my imagination, letting them slip into my dreams—just before the dawn came, before the band began to play.

#### The story of Jacqui and Alex

At fourteen, Jacqueline Medina still played with dolls—braiding their hair, dressing them up in a variety of outfits, and occasionally arranging them in circles for tea parties. After school, she carried her plastic, blond friends outside and lined them up next to the empty pool—a sky blue crater in the middle of La Resi—and when they leaned forward over the edge of the deep end where stagnant water collected and attracted swarms of mosquitoes, she kept them safe and dry with an outstretched arm. Around her, kids jumped recklessly into the pool, playing tag in the shallow end and bouncing soccer balls off the blue, chipped walls. This was in the mid-nineties, years after the 1986 earthquake had left a long, jagged crack in the middle of the pool and kept it permanently

empty. Now it was just a dry gathering place where neighbors chatted, kids played, and teenagers fell in love. And it was here that Alex first noticed Jacqui.

But when Jacqui was fourteen, Alex was already eighteen—tall and skinny with an Adam's apple that jutted out from the middle of his long neck. After school, Alex played basketball with Noé and wore short, jean cutoffs that showed just a hint of his white, hairy butt cheeks. His favorite shirt ended mid-belly and said, “*¡Al Diablo con la Virginidad!*” He considered himself a rebel. He also considered himself ready for a serious relationship. In the afternoons, after he had finished playing basketball, he wandered sweaty and horny into the central park of La Resi to watch Jacqui play with her dolls. “You just wait,” he told his friends who laughed at him as he salivated over her light skin, long black hair, and huge lips. For them, she just looked like a kid. “That girl is going to be beautiful and we’re going to have beautiful children together,” he predicted, defending himself. For some reason, at eighteen, Alex was ready to begin a family. And when his friends pressed him for an explanation of his choice of future wife, Alex’s response was simple. “I want my kids to have her hazel eyes,” he said.

Alex didn’t wait long to court Jacqui. With the motto of his favorite t-shirt, “To Hell with Virginity!” planted firmly in his mind, he jumped the fence surrounding Jacqui’s front yard, climbed through her window and, surrounded by carefully-groomed dolls and furry stuffed animals, made love to her. During the day, he told Noé and his friends about his encounters, predicting that he would soon have his attractive child with *ojos claros*. But before he could impregnate his future bride, Jacqui’s father, large and very religious, entered the bedroom and quickly put an end to their love-making.

Enraged, he forced Jacqui out of the house and watched, without protest, as she moved in with Alex and Alex's family who lived on the other side of the sidewalk. Rather than mourn the loss of his child, Jacqui's father seemed much more approving of this new arrangement which, in his mind, must have more closely resembled a marriage. But Jacqui was not happy. She missed her parents and a bedroom that was her own. At night, cockroaches crawled over her, and when she made love in the afternoons, she could hear Alex's little brother, William, breathing outside the door, listening.

In the middle of their short, secret affair, before they were caught, Jacqui posed for a picture on the front steps of her parents' house. In the photo, she wore her school uniform—a white blouse and blue, pleated skirt. Her socks reached modestly up to the edge of her skirt and her feet pointed inward. When she moved in with Alex, she took the photo with her and saved it in an album of her adult life, which she gradually filled. Years later, when she showed the picture to friends, she would say sadly and almost surprised, "This is how I was when Alex took me."

And, after he took her, it was four years before Jacqui bore Alex a child, a little girl, María Fernanda. And her eyes were undeniably brown.

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In the internet photo, La Resi had looked small, like the neat rows of apartments that were common in Lincoln, Nebraska, but when I finally saw it in person, I was shocked by its layers, the apartment buildings built into a hillside, the hidden alleyways

and endless staircases. I arrived in February of 2009, a little over a year after I had gotten married. Noé and I rented a pale, pink house about fifteen minutes away in a quieter neighborhood with clearly-defined blocks. But La Resi was a maze of rundown buildings, hanging laundry, and long stalks of bamboo, growing wild, clicking together in the wind. At the entrance, trees crowded over a dark path of broken cement that led up a steep incline to the parking lot. The tallest buildings were six stories tall and very thin—gray, feeble towers that could topple at any moment. At the foot of the hill next to the entrance were the abandoned buildings, those destroyed by the earthquake of '86. Chunks of cement were missing; staircases hung in midair, half-crumbled.

When we arrived for the first time in the tiny white car that we had just bought, one that we had to gun up the steep hill, I was nearly shaking, hoping that my Spanish would be good enough, wondering what Noé's friends would think of me. After we parked, I stumbled across the blighted parking lot that bubbled up unexpectedly under my sandals, skipping carefully around dog poop and mounds of unidentifiable pieces of trash.

On that first trip to La Resi, Noé and I visited Jacqui and Alex, but actually I remember very little about that first meeting. The greetings and surprise have blended together with too many other greetings and surprises that first week in El Salvador. What I do remember and will never forget, however, is what Jacqui looked like. In fact, she was obese, sitting on a couch with her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. From my position across the room, I couldn't see the color of her eyes, drowned in the dark circles that surrounded them. They looked to be a light brown. Alex was there too, sitting next to her on the tan couch in front of a cement-block wall, painted the same color as the couch. Like Jacqui's, his face looked tired and his stomach reached almost to his knees.

As we sat down with glasses of ice water, sipping politely and making small talk, I felt let down, confused. Around me, floral handcrafts and lace adorned the living room—decorations my grandmother might have chosen—and Jacqui talked about sewing and her plans for dinner. This was not the Jacqui of my story. The Jacqui of my story had been young. She'd been just a little girl—beautiful and vulnerable, cross-legged by the edge of a pool. In my mind, Jacqui was my friend, my contemporary, someone who still went out at night and had goals for her future. But here, in this room, Jacqui seemed lethargic, yawning as she kicked her overweight basset hound, wearing pajamas in the middle of the afternoon.

As Jacqui continued talking, I tried to drown out her weary voice, to let the original, the pleasant image stay in my mind—to savor the story and save one of my favorite characters. For the remainder of the visit, I sat next to a large fish aquarium, drinking my water and staring at unlit candles in the shape of oranges, half-melted in front of me. As Noé continued talking with his friends, I made an effort not to look up—because I knew that if I raised my eyes and began to pay attention, I would find myself confronted with this overweight, this tired, this aging Jacqui, who at only twenty-eight complained about her back, took frequent naps, and worried about who would take care of her when she was old.

The Story of Pico and Silvia:

They called Francisco, “Pico,” but nobody really knew why. He already had his nickname when he moved into his father’s apartment in La Resi. He was already thirty-three. Pico was tall and handsome with tight, curly hair and a new, dark gray Honda that

attracted swarms of beautiful women. He played goalie for a well-known soccer team in El Salvador and carried around large amounts of cash that he always claimed to have gotten from a generous aunt who was the owner of Lido, a bread and pastry company. A more likely explanation for his mysterious income, however, probably had something to do with his association with a band of thugs, the leader of which was a semi-famous hit man named Ramón. Like Ramón, Pico always carried a 9 mm. pistol with him and often pulled it out at the least provocation. But no one ever heard about him shooting anyone. He was usually smiling, just joking around.

Actually, Pico didn't get serious until he fell in love with Silvia, a prostitute who charged just three dollars or twenty-five *colones* a night. She had dark brown hair, green eyes, and a curvaceous body, but she was from a small town, was a little *chuca*, and everyone knew it. Pico, maybe looking for a challenge, or maybe seriously in love after a three dollar night, decided that she would be his girl and that he would teach her to be faithful. And so he took her to live in his father's house, just up the hill. He told her that she was no longer to work as a prostitute and promised that he would take care of her with the money his pastry-making aunt gave him.

But Silvia was only twenty-two and not ready to settle down. In Pico's house, she missed her best friend and ex-roommate, the girl they called "La China," with her tattoos and dirty mouth. In the afternoons, Silvia and La China used to open up the window to the bedroom they shared and lay half-naked on the bed listening to music. After school, Noé and his friends played cards outside Silvia's apartment, waiting for the girls to appear. Sometimes La China and Silvia would lean out of their window, caressing their



huge breasts, driving Noé and his friends crazy. Silvia couldn't drive any boys crazy when she lived with Pico.

And so, she began escaping at night, running out with La China to *prostíbulos* where they found men and made a few bucks. Everyone knew it and people started talking about Pico's girl and her nightly escapades with La China. It wasn't long before Pico began to get angry that his reputation had been compromised, and then, when Silvia refused to respond to his pleas for faithfulness, he started to get desperate. One night, when Silvia had disappeared with La China, Pico stayed up to wait for her. For hours, he paced the parking lot of La Resi, watching for his girlfriend and fingering his 9 mm. pistol. Only the security guard watched, tired and worried, from between the dark cars.

And then Silvia came. She came fearlessly, loudly, with La China and two men—shouting, laughing, and blaring music. They drove up the hill and into the parking lot, stopping boldly just outside of Pico's father's apartment. For a while Pico just looked on as the two couples got out of the car and started making out, foolishly, *descaradamente*. And then he made his move—alone, without Ramón and his band of thugs—and this time, Pico wasn't joking.

After a few moments of observing, as if he had suddenly obtained all the evidence he needed, Pico jumped, shouting, from behind a parked car, pulled Silvia from her man, punched her as hard as he could in the face, and watched as she crumpled to the ground. “*¡Hija de la gran puta!*” he screamed, turning to kick her in the face. And only La China whispered a curse as he pulled Silvia up from the ground, ignoring the tottering men around him, unaware of the security guard who crouched lower behind a car and kept a shaking hand on his rifle.

“¡*Sos una gran maldita!*” he spit in Silvia’s face, punching her again, feeling the ring he always wore cut into her cheek. She cried out, covering her bloody face and slumping into his arms. Only La China stepped forward to try to protect her friend, but it was easy for Pico to knock her off her drunken feet with a half-hearted shove. And in the rest of La Resi, nobody opened a window; no one cared to look outside or get involved in what was this time, conveniently, someone else’s business. Even La China, weakened by alcohol and surprised at Pico’s rage, finally stumbled quietly away with the two men. And the security guard, realizing there would be no fight, that Pico was just after a woman, turned around and pretended he didn’t see. So Silvia was left alone, whimpering softly, vaguely promising never to leave the house again. And then Pico, feeling moved by her repentance, believing he had rectified a wrong, had justly punished an unruly child, took her under the arms and dragged her, sobbing, back into his father’s house.

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I once saw Pico in real life, in a cafeteria, La Movida, just above a supermarket near our house in El Salvador. La Movida was a great place to get cheap lunches—a place where women wearing hairnets scooped large portions of meat and mashed potatoes onto plastic plates. Noé was the one who spotted Pico standing in line holding his tray, sandwiched between two elderly women. His socks were pulled up a bit too high, reaching the unattractive, mid-calf mark, and his potbelly made him look average, unthreatening. I never would have recognized Pico. He appeared subdued by middle age, his curly hair shaved closely to his head, his beard neatly trimmed. In place of a

gun, he wore a fanny pack around his waist and I wondered if he carried a tube of chapstick inside.

“Noé!” he yelled immediately when he saw us, craning his neck, unwilling to abandon his tray. Noé slapped him on the back and we gave up our places to follow him slowly down the crawling, elderly line. Noé asked him what he was doing there and he said he was going to eat and then pick up some lunch for his wife and their four daughters. His wife’s name was not Silvia.

Pico chatted with Noé for a while and then stopped talking to order tortillas politely from one of the women behind the counter and briefly rave about the bread pudding. To my surprise, the women seemed to love him. They laughed and talked to him like an old friend. When it was time to pay, Pico dug into his pocket to pull out a few crinkled bills. “After lunch it’s back to work,” he said, cheerfully.

Apparently, he no longer received money from that rich aunt.

#### The Story of Sparky and The Queen of the Soldiers:

MS-13 gang members didn’t start appearing in La Resi until after Sonia’s dramatic makeover. This happened when Noé was twelve or thirteen. Before that, his neighbor had been a chubby little girl with glasses and La Resi had been a relatively peaceful *colonia*, where adults let their kids wander at night. Sonia was fifteen or sixteen when she had her sudden transformation. It was inexplicable and quite unexpected. It seemed that one day Sonia had been a ninth grader riding around with training wheels still on her bike, pushing up her thick glasses to see in front of her, and the next, she was stripping for the after parties of *quinceañeras* and charging the neighborhood boys for

sex in back rooms. Sonia got skinny when she was sixteen and then painted her hair blond. She didn't have any breasts, but that didn't stop the boys from knocking on her door.

Perhaps the biggest break for Sonia came after the last offensive of the civil war in 1992. Suddenly, military officers came back to the city in droves, and some holed up in the abandoned buildings at the bottom of the hill at La Resi. These were buildings that hadn't been used since the earthquake of '86 because they were unstable and windowless. But Sonia often walked past these apartments, waving her new blond hair and gloating in her recently downsized body. And it didn't take long for the men to notice her. Soon, she was a working girl, making money giving pleasure to the men in the broken buildings, having sex on cracked floors covered in dirt. Everyone called her "The Queen of the Soldiers."

As the years passed, Sonia became more and more promiscuous, getting a job in a brothel and making out or sleeping with every boy who had reached puberty in her *colonia*. Soon she was attracting new kinds of people to La Resi—*malacates*—guys with malicious faces who stole the shoes off of Noé's friends' feet. They were a new breed of soldiers—gangsters who engaged in turf wars and charged *renta* for protection. They also fought over Sonia, threatened to shoot each other for her, vowed to protect her with their lives. But in the end, it wasn't one of her lovers that killed for her.

Sparky was not interested in Sonia. Instead, he came to visit Sonia's boyfriend, the boss of the local MS-13 gang, El Negro. When he walked around the neighborhood, Sparky always wore his long shirts unbuttoned, revealing MS-13 tattoos and a hairless

chest. He was also always accompanied by his bulldog—a mean, muscular kind of beast—whom he had, for unknown reasons, also named Sparky.

But despite the fact that he was a gangster, Sparky didn't have a terrible reputation in the *colonia*. In fact, the erroneous idea that Sparky had a kind heart was one that neighbors in La Resi shared and embraced. Evidence of his kind heart could be seen in his choice of girlfriend, they said—an awkward, curly-haired *bicha* who looked more like a skinny, unattractive boy—a girl whose name no one can remember. This was a girl Sparky loved when no one else would because, as he said sweetly, she was “sincere.”

But one evening, just as dusk was deepening, in less than a few minutes, Sparky became La Resi's biggest villain. That night, Noé walked to the corner of La Resi's park to call a girl on a payphone, outside of his parents' crowded apartment where he never had enough privacy for romantic conversations. Just as he dialed the number, he heard the sound of steps behind him and the next thing he knew Sparky had stuffed himself into the tiny phone booth to whisper into his face. “Have you seen Victorino that big-mouthed *cerote*?” he asked. “Call him for me. I'm gonna kill that *hijueputa*.”

Calmly, Noé told his girlfriend to wait a second and put his hand over the receiver just as Sparky pulled a gun out of his pants and laughed. “I don't know where he is,” Noé whispered and tried to continue his conversation. He was used to hearing people threaten to kill Victorino, his friend who talked too much and liked to brag about how rich his parents were. He was also used to the threats never being fulfilled. From the clear plastic of the booth Noé could see Sparky walk away, pacing back and forth through the park now almost empty in the growing darkness. He occasionally reached into his pants and pulled out his gun, looking agitated.

And then, on the other side of the park a young teenager leisurely stepped out of an apartment, not seeing Sparky. Noé watched the kid as he slowly moved in the direction of the phone booth, walking towards Sonia's apartment. It wasn't Victorino. It was someone Noé had never seen before—just some unlucky visitor.

At first, Noé didn't pay much attention when he heard Sparky begin yelling or when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sparky waving his gun in the air accusing the kid of sleeping with Sonia, of betraying his boss, El Negro. Sparky's words just sounded like mad ravings, the venting of pent-up frustration towards Victorino, or maybe towards no one at all. But after a while, something about the intensity of the shouting, the desperate tone in the defending, made Noé look up. And in the twilight, twenty feet from where he stood, he could see Sparky holding a gun up to the kid's temple.

The sound of the shot made Noé jump inside the tiny booth leaving the phone dangling on its cord, the girl on the other end forgotten. Immediately, the kid's body fell, a long shadow that suddenly lost its legs and tumbled down into a dark, convulsing pool. Outside the booth, Sparky started running, leaving the body on the ground, twitching. Noé said that the kid was still grunting as people from the *colonia* ran, screaming, out of their houses, calling for an ambulance.

But Noé didn't need to tell anyone that Sparky had killed the boy in La Resi. Somehow everyone knew and it was his name that was shouted through the windows, down the darkening streets. Word spread quickly and soon it was Sparky's body that had been found, machine gunned on the streets of a nearby market. Noé said that if he hadn't been killed in broad daylight in front of everyone, no one would have recognized his body. And the moment they heard of his death, Sonia and the curly-headed girl ran to see

the evidence. When they reached the market together and finally pushed their way through a growing crowd, there in a bloody heap, they recognized Sparky's tattoos, his brown boots, and, next to him, his bulldog, the other Sparky, already backing away, already just a street dog, an *aguacatero*. And Sonia's cries were loud and long, sad and deep like a widow's, making it easy to forget about the curly-haired girl and her loss—the loss of the only man who had ever loved her.

It was Sonia's fate people whispered about—as if they foresaw El Negro's murder or the thirst for revenge that would soon lead assassins to Sonia's front door. They seemed to sense her disappearance, her flight from the country and the gradual vanishing of MS-13 members from the *colonia*. It was as though they could see them now as one by one they were stabbed, shot, or found hanging from ropes in closets. They knew deep down, where they kept their own experiences and stories, what this meant for Sonia. This was not only the demise of Sparky, not just a death sentence for El Negro—it was the death of all her soldiers.

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I never met Sonia in person or saw Sparky's dog who disappeared long ago on the streets, but once I did see a picture of Sonia online. Her hair was long and parted in the middle, her face round and sweet. When she chatted with Noé, she told him that she was living in Hollywood, cleaning the houses of the rich. In one photo that she sent him, she stood in front of a lavish mansion with a large swimming pool that was surrounded by carefully-groomed palm trees. In the picture she was dressed like a Mexican *vaquera* in

cowboy boots, tight jeans, and a sombrero. Showing signs of former flirtatiousness, she put her hands on her hips and stuck out the toe of a boot as though she was satisfied with it all, as though this were all hers and her own doing. And then I suppose she returned to her cleaning, entered her boss's house again, poured bleach down toilets and scrubbed pots and pans with yellow rubber gloves. When I saw the picture, I wondered if she was happy, the dethroned queen, now one of many—sweating, bending down, obeying orders—and then also occasionally posing for pictures, scanning them, sending them out—the ones where she stood smiling and costumed, cocky and sexy—proud of nothing more than a borrowed kingdom.

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Even though the endings to the tales I had heard disappointed me, revealed to me that expectations of La Resi and its inhabitants were ideas founded on nothing more than a mythological past, at first, I searched desperately for it. This past haunted me as I bought Cokes from the store on the corner where Sparky had shot the kid a decade before. No blood stained the sidewalk. The payphone had been removed years ago. I walked, listening, past the window where Silvia and La China had listened to music and bared their breasts. I lingered next to the abandoned buildings of Sonia's kingdom. I sniffed for spirits, rubbed my toe in the dirt, pressed *mamón* leaves between my fingers, but I had felt closer to Noé's past in Nebraska at night, listening to his stories.



### The Story of Noé and Me:

But our tales were not just of the past. Noé and I had also told each other stories about the future. They were dreams, mostly. Before we went to El Salvador, we lay in bed at night and imagined the long vacation we would have, the trips to the beach, adventures with the crazy gang from La Resi. In Nebraska, we felt walled in, Noé especially, and this made us move compliantly, hopefully, to something new. Even though the immigration process was uncertain and everyone warned us that Noé's plea for papers might be denied, we smiled when we received the news that Noé's interview had been scheduled. We shrugged bravely and promised my family we'd be back soon when we boarded the plane for El Salvador.

As it turned out, life in El Salvador was not what I'd expected. Before I found a job, I was restricted to walking inside our walled-in community, unable to leave our neighborhood alone for fear of being mugged. In the afternoons, I paced back and forth, up and down the deserted sidewalks until the security guards looked at me suspiciously. When I couldn't sleep, I dreamed of Noé's past and tried to write it down only to find that I knew nothing, was still trapped, barred from accessing it.

And then, in March of 2009, I received a letter stating that I had been accepted to graduate school and had to begin in August. Even though no news of Noé's papers had come, Noé and I both agreed that I should go. We told ourselves that it would only be for a few months and that he would be joining me soon. But the nights before my departure, I stayed up sobbing, terrified of being separated from Noé, and terrified of going back to the place I had so eagerly left.

I moved into my parents' house in Nebraska to save money—the fourth time I'd returned since I left at eighteen—and lived in what was called the “guest room,” but which was actually being used as a place to store extra furniture and odds and ends. It used to be my room—the room I shared with my older sister. Some of our old books and pictures were there. The same pink carpet with the same stains. I was back in my own past.

But at least I was studying and had the hope of getting a degree and moving on. Noé, on whose back I had clung for so long, whose stories I had hungrily devoured hoping they would carry me somewhere—anywhere—seemed caught in a state of paralysis. In fact, he seemed to have gone farther back, slipping into a diluted version of his own past, the adventure and excitement already drained out into myths. He moved into his old bedroom at La Resi in his parents' apartment.

This was the room he'd slept in six years before when he dreamed about escaping to the U.S. I had seen this room. Paint was chipping off of the walls, the door did not shut completely, and the ceiling tiles were stained and sunken down. Noé slept on a mattress on the floor. Just as had happened to Jacqui, at night, the cockroaches came scurrying from dark corners and Noé covered up his face when he heard the swift clicking of their wings. He shared the apartment with his two sisters, two nephews, and his parents. The water only ran at night and so Noé and his family took ice-cold showers from a reservoir. And sometimes the water didn't ever come and then they prayed for rain or didn't shower at all.

We talked to each other every day over a web cam, both sitting in our old bedrooms in our parents' houses. The reception on the computer was often poor. The picture froze and our voices skipped and echoed. I could see Noé moving in slow motion on a plastic folding chair, the cement-block wall behind him. We had to scream and yell that we loved and missed each other, repeating endearments until our voices grew hoarse.

And sometimes, when we were talking, we heard a loud rustling above Noé's head. It sounded like a frantic scurrying, something weighty, that could fall through the flimsy tiles at any moment. Noé always looked up and hunched a bit in his chair when he heard the noise. "It's the animal again," he would say simply and we would both stop to listen, connected to its struggle somehow, shuddering at its panic. Noé told me that for as long as he could remember, even as a kid in that very room, he had heard this creature running back and forth over the tiles. It ran through the apartment, scaring our nephews and irritating Noé's mother. He thought it was impossible that it could still be alive, but no one in his family could deny that they heard the same noises, the same tapping claws. Sometimes, Noé's mom took a broomstick and walked throughout the house, pounding on the ceiling. When she did this, I could hear the loud, methodical thumping through the computer, a hollow sound that echoed through the speakers. Almost nightly, Noé said, she walked from room to room in that old apartment in La Resi, listening carefully, following the faint sound of tentative steps that sensed her presence, hitting the ceiling with her broom, trying to drive out an animal that seemed to live forever, that would not or could not leave.

## The Hills We Die On

Sometimes I think that the roots of all my defiance can be found in the divorce fantasies of my early twenties. In these fantasies, it wasn't really my business—not even my own divorce that I dreamed about. Actually, it was my dad who packed up his guns and rosaries and went to live in a basement apartment across town. In the fantasies, from our own houses, my siblings, my mom and I watched indifferently, with cold tolerance, when he retreated into his own mind, came to believe in new obsessions, converted to new religions. We told him honestly that we couldn't understand him and when we knocked on his door and stood awkwardly in the tiny studio apartment remarking on something on the TV, the separation was marked before us. Sometimes in my fantasies, my dad finally cried and made those promises we'd been waiting for when he said he'd do whatever we wanted just so he could be with us. But there were other less hopeful daydreams when I imagined that we said goodbye quickly and that he returned happily to his own life. We were relieved to know he didn't miss us. We could forgive distance as long as it was sincere.

In both versions of the divorce fantasy, a decision had been made and my family lived honestly. Friends and neighbors found out. They agreed that we had a right to feel uneasy about the loaded rifles and pistols hidden in the closet and tossed in the underwear drawer. They brought my mom casseroles and told her she deserved better. Sometimes in my fantasies my mom joined a book club or took up quilting.

When I had these fantasies, I was engaged to Noé, my boyfriend of about a year and we were about to have problems of our own. I knew that after I got married, I'd have

to move to El Salvador while Noé applied for his U.S. residency. I'd be living life in my second language, working through a tedious immigration process and, as everyone reminded me, starting my own family. I'd be countries away from my parents and their endless marriage. I'd be mired in other kinds of disappointments and worries. If I didn't want to, I wouldn't have to hear about their silent fighting or think about my mom alone in her big old house, tensing up when my dad came home from work early, and making sure the secret cabinet downstairs was locked up. But there was something about their relationship that dragged on and on over the years like my grandma's painful cancer the year that she could not die, that had grown a sort of restlessness in me, a resistance to silence I suppose. And this resistance was something that I'd carry with me even to Latin America when I saw a country that, like my family, continued to limp along surviving too many death throes by a collective, phony kind of peace.

Before the day when we found out that my dad had been having affairs for quite some time, the lack of affection, my dad's strange disappearances, and all of his obsessions, had been brushed away by my family and me as innocuous eccentricities. After all, my dad hadn't ever treated us badly and my mom's complaints about him were usually harmless criticisms about not paying bills or wearing holey shirts. It was true though, and no one could deny that my dad was a little strange and, while we laughed at his obsessions and long, withdrawn silences, his strangeness did something to separate us from him that we couldn't explain and that none of my siblings or I voiced to each other, maybe because there was no concrete reason to voice anything. My dad was a good man, though quiet and often alone. He worked hard and paid for our piano lessons. He

bragged about us to his friends. We didn't have a right to be unhappy with him. And anyway, we had each other and my mom.

But one afternoon in October of 2005, when my younger brother and sister and I still lived at home, my sister saw my dad hunched over the computer keyboard, pecking out new search terms with his index finger and scrolling down through pornographic images. Later, we found messages he had written to women and personal ads he had created and posted on the internet. We read about a man who loved hiking and enjoyed nature and who was looking for a companion, and when we read these ads, and looked at these conversations with women, and the history of dozens of porn sites—we could then wonder—legitimately wonder—about our dad. And I surprised myself that day when an anger sprang up inside of me as though it had already been there—an anger at the quiet coldness of our family and my parents' indifference to each other. I was surprised to think that maybe, secretly, I had always been searching for something. The shock I should have felt at our dad's blatant unfaithfulness was undermined by a dull sense of recognition as though this were all familiar. As though I'd dreamed it a million times.

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The civil war in El Salvador lasted for twelve years and ended in 1992. Like a giant explosion, it shook every part of the tiny country, crawling gradually down from the mountain villages of Chalatenango and Morazán into the plazas of the city, the front yards of the rich. During the war, Noé told me that he and his family hid under their beds at night after eight o'clock in the evening. During the day, he saw bodies littering plazas

and at night he went to sleep to the sounds of gunshots and helicopters. Noé's dad, a military officer, was gone for most of Noé's childhood. When he came home to visit, he arrived late at night, always dropped off by a different car.

Noé remembers a lot of stories about the war. He can tell me about the time when guerrilla soldiers climbed up onto a roof of another apartment in his *colonia* to point their RPGs at the nearby presidential mansion, and about how his family and neighbors lived in terror until the guerrillas were shot and killed, their bodies thrown four stories down. He remembers his family fleeing to a small town just outside the city of San Salvador and how, when they took the bus into the city, they were almost always stopped by military recruiters looking for young boy soldiers. Noé's mother had to make sure that each of her four sons had the special military IDs reserved for sons of military officers that protected them from recruitment.

But when I arrive in El Salvador in 2009, a year after Noé and I get married, almost no one is interested in talking about the war—or politics at all, for that matter. I never ask direct questions, but when Noé's friends and family talk about the past, they talk about neighborhood stories and old love affairs. When they talk about the present, they talk about the weather or gossip about the neighbors. And this is an election year, when a presidential candidate from the leftist party is favored, for the first time, to win.

In March of 2009, Noé and I sit in our small, rented house and watch news about the presidential elections. Noé has decided not to vote, explaining to me patiently, but as though he believes I will never understand, that both parties are corrupt and that, whatever the results of the election, things will continue as they always have in El

Salvador. “Nothing I can do will make a difference,” he says, and I’m surprised, upset at his willingness to be silent about this, to not even try. I think he has a bad attitude.

Noé and I haven’t invested in any furniture because we think that after his papers come we are going to go straight back to the U.S., and so we watch the elections on our TV, which sits in a corner of the living room on our tiled floor. Before us, the candidate for the liberal party, Mauricio Funes, makes an acceptance speech, one that is supposed to be historical. This is the first time that his party has won the elections in seventeen years, ever since it was formed after the U.N Peace Accords were signed in 1992.

Tonight, we eat cold, leftover pizza from the fridge. Everyone has told us not to go out, that there may be riots or violent celebrations. So we chew anxiously on cheese and pepperoni as the first FMLN leader is elected president of El Salvador. After Funes’ speech, on TV we hear someone shout the guerrilla chant, “*¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*” and then we hear a few gunshots in the street and some fireworks before everything goes quiet again. And in the years to come—the years we end up living in El Salvador—not much more happens.

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Later, my mom would say that she had always thought my dad had a problem with addictive behavior and that it had always bothered her. When she confessed this, I wondered if it had always bothered me too, if I had ignored signs of trouble that had been with us all along. I realized that I had always watched my dad become fascinated by things from a distance, never getting too close. I remember being a kid, six or seven



years old, and seeing my dad jump rope in the living room. This became a daily routine during one of his recurring obsessions with losing weight. I can still see the blur of the rope that surrounded him like a bubble and how his glasses fogged up with sweat so that it was difficult to make out his face as he performed tricks I never mastered in P.E.— skipping jumps or criss-crossing the rope in front of him.

I also remember the birds, the time he bought cockatiels and bred them in our already full, rented duplex. At one time, thirty birds crawled the floor of our living room and got trapped in mini-blinds. I can see my dad now, walking around with the yellow and white creatures perched on his shoulder, others curling their feet around his thick fingers; I remember the poop sliding, unnoticed down his back.

And then there were the herbs that he ordered in large quantities for years, the smoking, the book business, the new cars. Only now did I realize that when I thought of my dad, I thought of a string of hobbies. And now, with his new addiction, one we labeled “pornography” or just “unfaithfulness,” my mom said that she was finally ready to leave, that she was going to speak to my dad, to be honest, and break her long, built-up silence.

I remember very little about the confrontation after we found everything on the computer. My whole family met in the living room of my parents’ house the day of my grandmother’s wake. My dad’s mother had just died and my sisters and I were supposed to sing that evening. I know I had a migraine and was crying and I remember now that my dad was crying too and that he said again and again that he was going to leave and go live in his truck. He kept rubbing his face with his pink, calloused hands, his tears

catching in the stubble that would be shaved off before the wake. And I felt more for him then than I had before or have since, during the height of the conflict—the light of the explosion still glowing—when I could clearly see all that was twisted and broken about us. I remember that we told my dad that we loved him. We cried out that we had always wanted him but we didn’t know how to reach him. We couldn’t have told him before what was wrong, how we had felt that he had never been ours, that we had never known him and that he had never cared to know us, but now we had something. Now everything had gone up in flames. It was true that we had missed it for so many years, but we finally had proof in our hands. There *had* been a bomb.

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In 2010, Noé and I are still living in El Salvador, still waiting for his papers to come. I have gotten a job at a language academy teaching English and here, I am again struck by a resistance to remember history, to talk about the war or politics. In the classroom, students shrug off what they view as a boring history lesson, preferring to talk about soccer or their plans for the weekend. But while boredom with history and old stories is probably common in classrooms all over the world, what I cannot understand, am horrified by, is the lack of knowledge some students have about their country’s past. In fact, many seem completely unaware that anything happened at all. Rather than being old and familiar, talk of the civil war seems new to them and foreign. A fellow teacher of mine once tells me that it is as distant to her as the Boston Tea Party.

One day when I am helping students practice the present perfect tense, as part of an exercise, I read a question from the textbook: “Has your country had a civil war?”

I look over at Diego, a twenty-year-old university student who is usually talkative and a quick learner. But Diego isn’t as quick as usual to answer. “I don’t know,” he says, looking at his classmates.

I try to guide him, “What’s the formula for the present perfect?” I ask, but Diego shakes his head. That’s not the problem at all.

“I know the formula,” he says, “but I don’t know the answer. Have we had a civil war?”

A year later, Noé and I, still waiting for his papers, travel to the northern department of El Salvador, Chalatenango. I have read a novel about this area, a fictional account of rebels organizing just before the beginning of the civil war. I know that this is a place that was wracked by fighting, one in which the guerrilla movement was particularly strong. The day we drive to Chalatenango, we go as tourists, on a daytrip to visit the *tatús* that I have heard about, the underground tunnels dug by guerrillas to hide during the war.

Chalatenango is beautiful. High up in the hills of El Salvador, the air is cool and fresh and we can see huge lakes and wide, unpopulated stretches of land. The country has never seemed so big to me. As we drive up the steep, mountain roads, I become excited, thinking that here I will find something that is lurking underneath the surface, a history that no one seems eager to tell. The war has been buried, I think, under present

concerns and frivolous conversations. I want to hear what happened, to see proof of the struggle underground.

But on the way to the top of a mountain, our car, a little white Chevy Swing that we refer to as the “Super Egg,” fails us. It cannot make it to the top of the steep, rocky path. And so, Noé and I travel on foot to the top of the mountain, taking our own route, now unsure if we will be able to find the *tatús*. We crawl under barbed-wire fences where cattle have recently roamed, stopping occasionally to admire the view. Following Noé, I carefully pick my way through a field, stepping hard on the ground below me, stomping on it to feel for something hollow. The *tatús* have to be there; I’m sure I’m just missing them. I believe that below me there must be dark tunnels—open, mysterious spaces. But underneath my shoes the ground is stubbornly solid, never caving or sinking in. No matter how hard I search, there seems to be nothing at all on this land except firm, bottomless dirt and a couple of dried up cow pies.

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As spectators, my siblings and I believed that something would finally happen between my parents. After the confrontation, we imagined that they would get counseling and begin a sort of new, loving relationship, or that they would decide that they could not be together and would be happier separated. But nothing much happened. My parents went to a total of two counseling sessions. During both of them, my dad talked to the counselor about gardening, his current obsession. I remember that my parents’ backyard was briefly transformed during this time, tomatoes planted. But it

didn't last long. After the brief counseling stint, my dad withdrew into his bouts of silence again and the garden overgrew with weeds.

For three years, before I moved to El Salvador with Noé, I heard story after story about my dad. My mom would call me on the phone and complain that he had disappeared, that money was missing, that strange numbers had appeared on his cell phone bill. Sometimes I would go to my parents' house from the apartment I shared with Noé and would hear my dad talking to himself over a washing machine as it cycled. I could never understand what he was saying or imagine who he might be talking to. His life was a mystery to me. And over the years, he grew more and more distant and seemed to be less and less interested in letting us in on his life. But more upsetting to me than my dad's continued withdrawal and odd behavior, was my mom's silent reaction, her willingness to cohabitate with someone she didn't like, didn't trust, and had been hurt by.

There were nights when I sat in her dining room, cluttered with knickknacks and crude paintings of country scenes and listened to her worries and complaints. If it was cold, my mom would fix hot chocolate and in the summers she ate chocolate ice-cream with chocolate syrup. I had always been very close to my mom and so it didn't seem strange that she confided in me. But I could not understand why she continued to deliberate. After all, my mom was smart and educated; she had friends and resources to help her through a divorce. And she was also attractive. Her shoulder-length hair was still not gray and she exercised nightly to keep herself in shape. My dad, on the other hand, had gained weight again and had a current obsession with coffee and big breakfasts. I took my mom's physical appearance as evidence of strength and I didn't

understand why she clung to him or, rather, let him cling to her. She told me she was afraid of what would happen to him if he were left on his own.

For three years then, I continued hearing about my dad's disappearances at night, how he came home early in the morning with a roll of toilet paper or laundry detergent as an excuse for not sleeping at home. He had a brief affair with a woman at work, but then broke it off because he was disgusted by her gambling addiction. He also became devoutly Catholic, leaving rosaries on coffee tables and pictures of dead saints on the fridge. He began looking at pornography again and another personal ad was posted. My mom found a receipt for sex toys in his car and then, a pair of extra-large women's underwear under a loaded handgun in a dresser drawer. My sisters and I told her to get out, but my mom didn't listen. "No," she sometimes said. "I have to stay for your brother." This seemed to be another excuse of hers. My brother was still in high school and living at home and she thought a divorce would crush him, as though her relationship with my dad was the key to his adolescent happiness.

But while my mom silently waited for my brother to grow up, my dad continued to withdraw and build up a large collection of guns, often leaving them loaded in his closet or dresser. Once, my mom called me, her voice shaking, to tell me that she had found a knife with its blade the size of her forearm stuffed into a backpack in a closet. My dad never told my mom he was going to buy these weapons and she didn't know when he bought a new one until she opened up a closet door or pulled open a drawer. Severely in debt, she cried when she found crumpled up receipts for thousands of dollars of guns and ammunition.

But even with the guns, my mom said she felt too guilty to leave. When she wasn't talking about my brother's mental wellbeing, she often said she hadn't tried hard enough to be a good wife. "I'm not forgiving," she said. "I'm always nagging him." Anyway, she worried what her parents would say. No one in the family had gotten a divorce. "They'll ask me what I did to try to save this," she said, talking about her marriage "and I want to be able to say that I tried."

"And the guns?" we would ask.

"Oh, I'm not sure it's a hill to die on," she'd say. This was one of her favorite expressions, maybe one she had learned from her military father. What she meant was that this wasn't worth fighting about, not worth breaking the silence. "Maybe," she would say, trying to be diplomatic, "*it is* a hobby."

But I knew that the weapons made her worried. One night, she took me into her basement and showed me a cabinet that she'd built, one that she had stored inside a large, walk-in closet. "I've locked them up," she told me, talking about the guns. And she wouldn't tell anyone where she hid the key.

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In February of 2011, the immigration process has become more complicated than Noé and I had imagined. At one point, the U.S. embassy requests Noé's dad's birth certificate, one that is kept in a village called Paisnal. This is the town where Don Miguel, Noe's father, was born and grew up and he asks if he can go with us to see his family and his old house that they are preparing to tear down.

On the way to Paisnal, I hear Noé asking Miguel about life in the military, wondering why, at seventeen, he chose to leave his family and voluntarily enlist. Noé asks how Miguel's family, many of whom were later involved in the guerrilla movement, reacted. These are questions that Noé doesn't usually ask. This is a past that Miguel rarely brings up, one that he brushes aside with his thin hands, that he ignores by rolling his eyes up to the ceiling. I lean forward eagerly to listen. But as we drive out of the city and into tan, hilly countryside, Don Miguel's low mumbles combine with the sound of our muffler and are ripped away by the open window. I hear very little of what he says. I can only see him gesticulating as he always does, his long fingers slowly stretching themselves out before him. He presses his thumb and index finger together and moves them up and down as though he's carefully maneuvering a puppet, pinching the strings of truth with his fingertips. I'm disappointed by the conversation, used to Don Miguel's evasions, and frustrated by silence. I hunker back into my seat and let myself doze.

El Paisnal is a tiny town and Don Miguel has forgotten the route. After turning around numerous times and driving off the road down frightening precipices that Miguel claims to find familiar, we finally find ourselves among a cluster of houses scattered over farmland. As we pull up, little boys who have Noé's brothers' faces yell and wave at us to park. These are the grandchildren of Miguel's siblings. We meet them one by one, are introduced to various dogs and parakeets, and offered water and *jocote* fruit. But soon we are left with only Noé's cousin, Dina, and her mother, Miguel's sister-in-law, Jesús. While the rest of us sit on plastic chairs on the porch, Jesús, wearing a sheer nightgown and white sandals, reclines beside us in a hammock, pushing herself against the wall of



the porch with the tips of her toes. She is seventy-seven years old and hard of hearing, speaking loudly into my ear and caressing my arm whenever she swings close enough.

On the light blue wall at the back of the porch hang photos of dead relatives. A child grimacing, one who died when, as Jesús tells me, her liver “just shrank up.” There is also a photo of a family killed in the landslide of 2001 when two earthquakes shook San Salvador. And then there is a young man, looking serious and handsome in a suit and tie. He studied at the National University, the government school, and was involved with the guerrillas. Jesús tells me he was shot in the head as he drove his truck near campus. He was only twenty years old.

As Jesús tells this story, Miguel does not flinch or appear uncomfortable. Instead, he nods and looks at the picture. Even though many of Miguel’s relatives and the inhabitants of his village, Paisnal, were guerrilla soldiers or sympathizers, no one seems uncomfortable in his presence mentioning victims of the war. They talk about it just like another tragedy, like an earthquake or liver failure.

Later, Don Miguel leaves to take a walk around the property, Noé begins talking to Dina, and I find myself alone in front of the swinging hammock with Jesús. Emboldened by her eagerness to talk about the past, I ask her about life in Paisnal during the war. “Was there fighting here?” I ask and I see Noé look up from the other end of the porch, widen his eyes, and shake his head. But Jesús does not stop her rocking.

“Oh yes,” she tells me. “Imagine where we are.” She looks to either side of her. “Do you see how we’re right in the middle of these two hills?” I nod, looking up, feeling suddenly very low in the valley. “That one,” she says, straining to sit up a bit and point to her right “was the military hill and that one,” she looks to her left, “was where the

guerrillas were. And here we were caught in the middle. It was terrible,” she says. “We slept under tables and could hear them yelling at each other all night.” Jesús catches herself on the wall with her foot and stops to sit up. “The bullets shot right over us, but *gracias a Dios*, here we are.” She spreads out her hands to the open, peaceful land before her and smiles.

By the time Miguel comes back, we have begun to talk about other things, but even so I have the feeling that there is no tension among them. Although political differences have never been explored, and Miguel’s decision to leave has never been criticized or questioned, I sense no underlying discomfort or resentment. Instead, Jesús kisses Miguel on the cheek, shakes her head and laughs, telling me how handsome he was when he was young, what a shame it is that he rarely visits. When we leave, she gives us mangos to take home. And Dina squeezes me after a goodbye kiss and whispers in my ear, “Please bring my *tío* back here. Please. He’s family.”

On the way home, in the falling light, as the hills of Paisnal recede into the distance, I come to feel that the silence of this country is one that is increasingly unfamiliar. I find that this is not the silence of my mother, the silence I have hated and wanted to break for so long. And I wonder if there can be different breeds of silence, if it can ever be useful. There is the passive silence of my mother and then there is the silence of Paisnal, and perhaps all of El Salvador, and this type of silence, the ways in which bits of truth are left unmentioned or forgotten, seems far more intricate; it is a silence whose nuances I still cannot capture.

Here, far away from my mother, from the quiet, repressed sadness I know so well, is Jesús and her family huddled down under tables, dodging bullets, never safe, but

always surviving in some space wedged in the middle of conflict. They can hear the fighting on the hills, the taunts and the bullets, but they remain where they are, where can stay alive. Even after the war, they continue to step skillfully around issues, treading some position that is staunchly in-between—but they don't seem to close their eyes or ignore what is going on—I sense that they are always seeing, always listening, always aware.

And I am here too now, far from home, angry and loudmouthed, stamping on the mountains of Chalatenango, pushing my feet into the dirt, searching for something, a conflict to dig up as I have learned to do in life, as I thought my parents' errors have taught me. But as we drive home in the dark car that roars loudly and drowns out words, now after Paisnal, after Jesús and Dina and the valley that appears unwounded, the land seems suddenly strange and nothing is familiar anymore. Here, my heroes become cowards and my cowards, heroes. Everything is turned around, complicated. And here I have to slow down, to listen carefully, step gently. Here I'm still learning. This is not the land of my mother after all. I'm still a stranger in these hills.

## Stuttering in *Clavazones*

In one of the racier scenes of the Christian romance novel *On the Wings of the Morning*, Victoria “Smokey” Simmons, who is running from a wicked pirate, is forced to grab Dallas Knight, a swarthy seaman and kiss him at length in an alleyway located, for some reason, right in front of a brothel. Not surprisingly, while the kiss saves Smokey’s life, the incident gives pious Dallas the wrong idea throughout much of the novel. While Dallas dreams about Smokey’s luscious lips and big, gray eyes, he has, unfortunately, pegged her as a low-grade slut, clearly unfit for the religious, upstanding man that he is. Of course after a few life-threatening storms on the high seas and a couple of handily-won duels, Dallas gets to know Smokey as the chaste virgin that she really is. They fall in love, get married, and sail off as missionaries together on the ship, *The Aramis*.

As a preteen who devoured these stories with my three sisters—all full of pubescent lust and all forced by parental censorship to satisfy that lust in the meticulously wholesome world of Christian romance—I relished such suggestive scenes—the ones in which the otherwise virtuous protagonists were forced by the need to survive into compromising situations that revealed their natural knack for seducing men without tainting their character. I dreamed of precisely those situations in my own life. These were situations like in *Donovan’s Daughter* when Marvail Donovan must take shelter in the house of the town doctor, Alexander Montgomery, during a snowstorm and spend the entire night on his sofa. Shortly after they get married to avoid a town scandal, Marvail, by some happy chance, falls down the steps of the one-room schoolhouse where she

teaches and Alex, who is a doctor, asks her to undress so he can examine and massage the bruises left on her thighs and “bottom.”

In my early years, I put a lot of stock in these stories. They were my sex education, my initiation into the world of romance and I believed and embraced them wholeheartedly. In fact, I spent the greater part of my middle school years staring out the windows of classrooms, dreaming about life in log cabins, milking cows alongside my incredibly attractive, muscular husband, shirtless in his overalls, now a devoutly religious man of course, but rough around the edges—like Sean Donovan in *Sean Donovan* who rejected God long enough to join a gang of thieves, and was saved from the gallows by Charlotte Cooper, a fiery redhead who at first only wanted him because she needed a blacksmith to work in her livery. My fantasies were never fulfilled. I did not date in middle school.

The Christian romance novels that I read almost always took place in the eighteen hundreds and, with few exceptions, such as *On the Wings of the Morning*, they were set on the prairies of the Midwest. Bonnet-clad women and burly men with farmer’s tans fell in love in carefully-crafted, decent ways. These romances were imagined for the most part by middle-aged housewives on the Great Plains—ridiculously prolific writers.

What strikes me now as I try to remember the plots of the fifty or so books I must have read in between the ages of twelve and fourteen is the halting, awkward dialogue present in nearly every story. This characteristic of Christian romance writing, which I think existed almost across the board, even among the most skilled of authors, was perfected especially by Janette Oke, an elderly Canadian. In fact, in almost all of her

books, the characters have pronounced stutters. The stuttering becomes especially painful in scenes of intense passion (right before a peck on the cheek, for example) or embarrassment (caused perhaps by a man seeing a woman with her hair down). I remember even having the sense to complain about it as a kid, trying to read through the dialogue out loud to see if people really sounded that way. It slowed up the stories for me considerably, especially because I tended to obsessively pronounce every letter of every word silently with my lips. “I—I—I l—l—love you!” stuck like a spasm in my head. I made sure I pronounced the letters the correct number of times and even honored the exclamation mark silently. I read such strange, unnatural sentences carefully and almost daily. They were my intense rehearsals for the real life passion and embarrassment that would no doubt come to me one day in the form of men

I met Noé a month before my twenty-third birthday. By then, I hadn’t picked up a romance novel in almost ten years and had largely forgotten my early grassland fantasies. My love life had not exactly taken off. Even after traveling, learning Spanish, and graduating from the university, I still carried the innocence inculcated in me in early childhood. This was protected, I think, not by any sort of natural virtue, but mostly by severe shyness. Conservative values aside, there was no one preventing me from getting a boyfriend as all of my sisters had. A shyness that had haunted me since childhood continued to plague me in my adult life, causing the effort of dating and, more importantly, making the small talk required on dates, to be a rather daunting idea.

Fortunately, I met Noé as his English teacher, a significant advantage for me. When I met him, I had only been teaching English to immigrants and refugees in Lincoln,

Nebraska for a few months, but I had already discovered that, despite my shyness, teaching was for some reason not a frightening activity for me. In fact, teaching gave me energy, made me talkative and even funny. It was a mystery that did not escape me, but I accepted the surprise gratefully. Actually, this surprise was similar to the one that I had discovered in third grade, when I auditioned and won the role of the main character, Mister Egghead, in a class play. In the class production, I pretended to have a British accent, made some exaggerated facial expressions, and was met with huge roars of laughter from the third-grade audience. From that moment, I loved acting in front of people and later landed leads in high school plays and musicals.

So teaching was like being onstage. My students often wouldn't believe me when I characterized myself as an extreme introvert. In fact, I often found myself so caught up in my newfound confidence that I distanced myself from the shy students by mercilessly picking on them in class and asking them to please speak up. Of course, I had never spoken up in class myself. In any case, I considered my teaching personality to be truer to who I was than the person I became when my paralyzing shyness blindsided me in public situations. When I taught, I was in front of an audience. It was like belting out the song, "I'm Just a Girl Who Can't Say No!" in high school. I usually felt confident that I would be a huge hit.

When I was in sixth grade, reading *Sean Donovan* during personal reading time, I thought that the main character's name was pronounced "Seen." So did my sisters. I remember it being a huge letdown when we found out that his name was actually Sean. We felt we had been cruelly deceived. Noé's name was also a surprise. After seeing it

written down, I pronounced it *No way* in my head, but on our first day of private classes, he coached me on the pronunciation carefully—*No way* with an accent on the second syllable. I jotted it down in my notebook.

Noé seemed cheerful, almost bubbly when we met. He wore a tie-dyed shirt with bright blue and yellow colors. His face was round and a little pudgy with the new weight he'd recently put on in the U.S., his skin tan from working on the roof. He missed El Salvador, the country that he had left two years before, and he often longed for his friends, his family, and a dating world that he understood. In fact, when I asked him what he wanted to focus on during our classes, he said he basically wanted advice about how to act on dates with women in the United States. I scoffed inwardly at his number one English goal, but also felt a bit nervous. My usual teacherly-confidence was on the line. It was clear I didn't know anything about dating and, even when I wasn't feeling shy, it would certainly be hard to feign any kind of expertise in this area.

I began to fear and slightly resent Noé with his bright shirt and toothy smile. His priorities were all out of order, I thought. He didn't look very serious. He just wanted girls. Noé explained to me that he had just broken up with his girlfriend and had started dating again. His last date with an American girl had not gone so well. He had gotten nervous and forgotten his English. I nodded, trying to appear compassionate and, above all, knowledgeable about small talk and acceptable dating dialogue, but at the last minute I felt paralyzed by something like stage fright. My acting abilities failed me and I tried to distract him by pointing out some beginning readers we might want to look at to practice pronunciation.



Even though I tried to distract Noé, we inevitably ended up talking a little about dating in the U.S. It happened during our second class. My goal was for Noé not to find out that I had never dated anyone. I did not want him to know that I had only experienced the close-mouthed kisses in community theater productions where I had to kiss forty-year old men in the musical *Oklahoma!* I suppose another teacher in a similar situation could have taken comfort in the language barrier and given simple, dumbed-down advice, reasoning that the student would only understand about fifty percent of the answers anyway, but unfortunately Noé spoke quite a bit of English and I had studied Spanish at the university. We were able to communicate quite well for hours at a time and any time there was a misunderstanding, Noé had the habit of trying to clear it up. Leaning forward across the table, he caught every stumble I made, took copious notes on new phrases I taught him, and asked complicated questions about culture. Our classes were emotionally taxing for me.

In the romance novels I read, strange complexes and fears were common. For example, Marvail Donovan had an irrational fear of doctors. Every time her husband, Alex, touched her, she recoiled. He was patient with her for months, gently coaxing her to let her hair down in front of him, to let him braid it, and eventually to let him touch her bruised thighs. My friends said I needed someone who was laidback, quiet, and patient—a man who wouldn't pressure me into anything and who was as quiet as I was. But Noé didn't even try to be gentle. Instead, during our second class, as I stumbled through my advice about how he might want to introduce himself to a girl in English, he interrupted me to ask about my dating history. "How many boyfriends have you had?" he wanted to

know. Immediately, I began to bite the skin around my nails as I always did when I was nervous. I shrugged my shoulders before admitting I'd never had a boyfriend. But of course, I'd gone out with plenty of boys, I was careful to add, swallowing pieces of skin. I didn't say that the boys had only been friends.

Noé didn't buy it. He clearly did not believe that anyone could be uninvolved romantically for twenty-three years. He wanted to know if I was a lesbian. Blood spurted out of the sides of my nails and I had to excuse myself to dig around for a Band-Aid in a first aid kit kept by my boss on the second floor. I certainly wished I had such a legitimate explanation. Instead, I would have to give the unbelievable excuse that I was too busy for boys or maybe I would say that I was just too picky and wanted to date only the right guy.

I can't remember what I said when I got back. I'm sure it was something mumbled, probably something just as awkward, but hopefully more indecipherable than anything Janette Oke's characters would have said. I tried to direct Noé's attention quickly to the grammar book in front of us. As he read through exercises out loud, I could slowly feel my tongue congeal and settle heavily behind my upper teeth. My throat filled with saliva and I swallowed frequently. "Great pronunciation," I told him occasionally, pointing to words here and there and asking him to repeat the sounds. My index finger looked stiff and bulky in the Band-Aid.

And this happened when I was almost twenty-three, just following a year of unprecedented romantic activity for me, but one in which I was also no specimen of beauty or picture of health. That year, I got braces on my teeth for the second time. I let

my hair grow out almost down to my waist and dyed it black. In *Donovan's Daughter*, Marcaill's long black hair is so thick, that it gives her headaches when she has to wear it tied up in a bun. My hair was so thin that the circumference of my pony tail was roughly the size of a nostril. The color was also not the most flattering for my pale skin. I chose it as a last-ditch effort to cover up a botched dye job that had left my hair purple. That year I also got migraine headaches for the first time, and they left me alone, hunkered up in bed, pressing my thumbs into my eyes until I was blind for seconds afterwards. When I was twenty-two, my knees started aching unbearably from running every day. I bought my t-shirts in the little boys' section at thrift stores and wore sandals year-round. At twenty-two, I was either passing through a late-onset, awkward adolescence, or prematurely, decrepitly aging.

Yet somehow, against all reason, and despite my developing physical defects, that year, three boys fell, more or less, in love with me. It was really just an accident of poor timing on their parts. I had never had a boyfriend before and, other than a few flirtatious comments and glances exchanged over the years, I'd had no significant contact with members of the opposite sex. In a matter of twelve months, my entire romantic past was created. It had a very short-lived boom and then died out with no drama and few actual words spoken.

Of course, my negligible little brushes with romance can be unfavorably compared with almost anyone else's on the planet, but compare them with Noé's romantic life during the same year: In 2005, Noé dated a tall, gorgeous blond named Mary and spent his evenings playing racquetball with her at the gym. He told me she was the most athletic girl he had ever met. At least eight other girls also fell madly in love

with him that year and called him frequently despite a language barrier that must have been almost insurmountable at the time. His ex-girlfriend, dark and voluptuous, sent sensual pictures of herself all the way from El Salvador, reclining on her bed with captions such as, “*te deseo*.” Later, he showed me these pictures when I wanted to see photos of El Salvador. They were stuffed into an envelope in a box under his bed. The year before I met Noé, she was still pining away for him in El Salvador and he had to tactfully reject her over expensive, long-distance calls, while he jogged alongside Mary and her perfectly toned body. In the evenings, he avoided answering the phone for fear of having to speak English with one of the eight love-struck girls. He had been in the country for only one year.

That same year, I only had three admirers and they were all doomed from the beginning: Travis Gustafson, a tall, wiry friend of my brother-in-law’s, with lashless eyes, flushed skin, and a receding hairline, who spent hours writing his master’s thesis on something to do with soil; Dustin Dahlberg, a heavily-bearded art student with incredibly small ears whose inaccurate portrait of himself hung in his parents’ basement; and Natanael Pérez, a half-Guatemalan, heavily-tattooed screamer in a hardcore rock band, with multiple piercings, an occasional afro, and an unaccountably beautiful ex-girlfriend.

My actual conversations with Travis and Dustin were very limited. Both of them managed to hang around my apartment and my parents’ house frequently, speaking about their feelings only to my family members and friends and rarely addressing me at all. I can remember Sunday dinners at my grandparents’ house with Travis. In the mayhem created by my large family, I only felt vaguely uncomfortable by his shy glances and quiet invitations to go see movies or play Frisbee golf. For his twenty-sixth birthday, in a

blatant show of pity, my grandma put candles in an angel food cake. We sang to him while he stared his blank eyes downward and turned a darker shade of pink. My grandma took a picture in which his bony neck is craning over a candle that says “26.” He is completely alone in the photo. It wasn’t until a year or so later after my mom had fixed Travis up with a missionary from Brazil—equally pale, with the same naked eyes—that my family confessed that both Travis and Dustin had felt that I was the girl they wanted to marry. Too frightened to actually share their feelings with me, their advances had been carefully calculated, clandestine and, in the end, futile.

Nate was a little more aggressive. I considered him a good friend and we spent hours talking on the phone. Due to a dullness that I attributed to his former drug abuse, our conversations were never particularly deep. However, despite the fact that he sometimes couldn’t remember his middle name and badly pronounced it when he could, Nate entertained me and easily believed all of my theories about life. Over the years, as he became bored over my obvious lack of interest, we gradually lost touch. Recently, I found out that he is now an Episcopalian monk and occasionally posts pictures of himself online, wearing extravagant vestments.

Needless to say, I learned no more from these eventless encounters with romance than I had from reading romance novels as a preteen. My self-esteem was momentarily boosted and I felt certain that I had become some sort of expert at identifying immediate incompatibility, but I had nothing very concrete to take away from these experiences except the rapidly fading memory of what it felt like to be wanted.

But any sort of confidence gained by having these three ill-fated suitors faded when I was confronted with Noé's real-life successes at love. Noé had had a string of very serious girlfriends before me, one of whom became a model in El Salvador (and then, unfortunately, a prostitute). And the pictures I saw later of Georgina, his last Salvadoran flame, were by no means encouraging. She looked like the actresses I had seen in *telenovelas* in my high school Spanish classes.

It's true though that I can't complain about everything. By some stroke of luck, a few months before I met Noé, I cut my hair up to my chin and got my braces off—transformations that perhaps, indirectly, led to our eventual marriage.

It's surprising, I think, the rapidity with which I became less awkward with Noé, the smoothness with which we eased into dating. After only a few months of English classes, he quit abruptly and told me that he wanted to help me with my Spanish, to talk at coffee houses and restaurants instead of the cold, bare office of Lincoln Literacy Council. I could see by his frequent phone calls and occasional compliments that he was interested in me and, despite my initial nervousness, agreed to meet with him ostensibly to work on my pronunciation. We began to speak the same language and in Spanish, like onstage or in front of the classroom, I felt a sort of comfort. I took refuge in my license to sound strange. Once, getting carried away in my confidence, I even imagined I might sound sexy until Noé told me with his characteristic bluntness that I sounded like I had a speech impediment. But Noé's honesty was somehow reassuring. He forced me to show him who I was and even when I mumbled answers about my shy, lonely past, he didn't seem to care, always moving on to the present, dreaming about our relationship. I fell in

love with Noé, in part, because he existed in the real world. His problems were not psychological like mine. He cared about making money to help his family buy an apartment in El Salvador and he cared about speaking English so he could get a better job, one that didn't involve working on the roofs in the cold Nebraska winters and scorching Nebraska summers.

Even though English was Noé's second language and even though he sometimes stuttered through phrases, halted, and scratched his head, he didn't seem to carry any trauma or believe that embarrassment was worth his time. He told me that I was shy and nervous around people, that I looked at the ceiling or floor when I spoke, and had trouble getting words out in public, because I didn't have enough real problems to worry about. I cared too much about what people thought of me. Noé, who had grown up in the middle of the Salvadoran civil war, gotten a job when he was underage to pay for his education and his parents' rent, and paid a coyote to take him across the U.S. deserts at night so that he could try to save his family from poverty, didn't have time for those kinds of first-world complexes as he considered them. This was a relief. What I had thought were legitimate causes for rejection—my shyness and inexperience—were so trivial to Noé that he rarely had interest in hearing about them.

Sometimes, when I had a confession all geared up or my grandma took out a book of incriminating photos, Noé excused himself to watch a soccer game on TV or go for a long run. He wasn't particularly interested in my past full of glasses, braces, and the insecurities that were borne from a wardrobe of high-water pants. Noé firmly believed that my problems were problems that only *gringas* had.

He developed this theory after dating Mary and hearing about her own insecurities. “In El Salvador, it doesn’t matter if you’re ugly or if someone tells you you look strange in your older brother’s clothes. *No te tenés que clavar*,” he taught me. *Clavar* meant nailing yourself down, obsessing about something that wasn’t worth your time. In my case, it meant obsessing about shyness, wondering if I was normal enough, attractive enough to be loved. And my *clavazones* were less than impressive to Noé. After all, his family had bartered for their clothes from the market and his little sister had been mute until she was ten. That didn’t stop him or his siblings, including the mute sister, from having gangs of close friends and slews of lovers. He did not indulge my social phobias and I found that the less he indulged them, the more I tended to downplay them myself and shrug off the attacks of shyness, the freezing of my tongue.

Now I think that maybe in *Donovan’s Daughter* if Marvail had encountered the same bored indifference from Alex when she had told him about her unaccountable fear of doctors, her *clavazón* would have been cured much sooner. The lines, “I—I’m so scared. P-p-please let me alone awhile,” wouldn’t have dragged on for so many pages and she wouldn’t have needed to fall down the one-room schoolhouse stairs for Alex to have touched her thighs.

But it would be too easy to say that my past and my continuing, nagging shyness did not affect our present at all, and that my inexperience didn’t cause old awkward feelings to resurface even after we decided to get married. I sometimes still felt like the hesitant, stuttering protagonists of Janette Oke’s love stories.



It is unbelievably embarrassing never to have had sex with someone when you are twenty-four and, when I think about my first experience, I think about my friend, Mary Ann, who is twenty-seven and has never learned how to ride a bike. After years of putting it off, now, what is so easy to many six-year-olds has become a point of absolute terror for her. Because she decided not to try at an earlier age, she will now have to learn secretly and, if she learns at all, the experience will no doubt be very painful and humiliating. This, I think, pretty accurately describes the loss of my virginity.

It happened on the first night of our honeymoon in a hotel that was old with tiny elevators whose steel doors clanged shut as if to pronounce some unfavorable, maybe fatal sentence. The lights in the room were dimmed and the curtains red and heavy. Even when they were pulled back, the cloudy, November sky provided only a gray illumination on the large, pillared bed. What was meant to be a romantic ambiance came across as dismal, even ominous.

As a thirteen-year-old, I could guess in the Christian romance novels I read, which female characters were the best lovers. For example, although Alex finally coaxes Marcail into bed after months of post-marriage celibacy, I found it difficult to imagine her as passionate or skilled at making love as the sultry Smokey or rebellious Charlotte. I must have always had a little fear even before I met Noé that I would prove to be more of a Marcail than a hot-lipped woman of the sea and these fears haunted me that night.

But romance novels also skip over the love scenes, giving no details, just describing the long, lustful, nighttime glances. Then, it is always the next morning and

the success of the seduction can only be assumed by the fact that the two lovers always wake up in each other's arms, smiling and happy.

The next morning, Noé was snoring on the other side of the bed and it took me awhile to remember where I was. I felt dirty and alone and went to the bathroom to take a quick shower. Later, when I tried to put in a contact, it ripped in half and I was left blind in one eye. When I emerged from the bathroom, uncomfortable and nervous, I found Noé awake, yawning and rubbing his eyes. When he saw me, he gave a slight nod and mumbled "good morning," but to my relief, he made no mention of the night before, gave me no evaluation of my performance. Instead, he turned on the small TV in front of the bed, stretched and groaned, not yet ready to wake up.

Without saying anything, I crawled into bed next to him, my head close to the TV, squinting so I could make out the faces of people on a reality show on the screen. That day, the show happened to be an all-day marathon about stuttering. One by one the victims appeared—sad, awkward, uncomfortable, sharing their stories and sobbing uncontrollably during interviews. I watched as cameras followed them trying to apply for jobs, giving graduation speeches, attempting to get dates. I mouthed their words, and the sounds that skipped over their lips skipped over mine as well. I read their mouths as carefully as I had read the lines of dialogue in Janette Oke's novels when I was a kid.

Noé quickly became bored with the program and fell asleep once again, but I stayed up, my one eye squeezed shut against blindness. For hours, I followed the stories of stutterer after stutterer, fascinated by their fears, their repeated failures, one eye following their every movement until the red curtains became darker and the sky a heavy, depressing gray. Slowly, one story after another came to an end. Mark got an attractive

girlfriend, Kelly found a job at a bar, and I think somebody may have even won a spelling bee. In any case, dreams were reached, confidence gained and love attained. I found it heartening, especially as I analyzed and fretted about how well I had done the night before.

After the program ended, I glanced over at Noé with my one quickly drying-out eye. His mouth was open and he was stretched out, sprawled across his half of the giant bed—clear signs that if he had been disappointed in me, he was not worried about it. But it took me a while to decide to peel the other contact off of my eye, curl up by his side and try to sleep as well. I was not yet a natural at refusing to compare myself to the other, better lovers I imagined. Like Marcail, I still had to try hard so that, in all my fears, I would not be *clavada*.

*Descarada*

Brenda, who would later be known as Judith, left El Salvador with her sister when she was sixteen, crossed the border into Guatemala and then into Mexico on foot, and ended up as a waitress in Detroit. I met her six weeks after I arrived in El Salvador from Nebraska, next to a water dispenser in the lobby of a language academy where I was applying for a job as an English teacher. Brenda was a teacher there and, like me, newly arrived from the United States. Just a few months prior, she had been deported, handcuffed in the restaurant where she worked serving pizzas and beer, and sent directly on a plane back to her home country of El Salvador, where only one elderly aunt remembered that she existed. Brenda wasn't alone for long though. In a few weeks her Mexican-American boyfriend from Detroit arrived and they got married the following weekend, hoping that the United States government would pardon Brenda and allow her to reenter the U.S. But things would not be that simple. The timeline for a visa would be long, it might take years, and her husband decided to wait things out back in the States.

Brenda told me her story as we sat next to the water dispenser, folders of students' grades closed on her lap. I told her my story as well—how I had met my Salvadorian husband Noé back in Nebraska where I'd taught him English, and how after we had gotten married a year before, we'd started the process for him to get his permanent residency. Now, we were just waiting in El Salvador for the U.S. embassy to call him for an interview. Brenda listened attentively. Her English was perfect and so I did not even attempt to speak the strange, formal Spanish I'd learned at the university. In fact, Brenda's accent was so good that I forgot she was Salvadorian. And she seemed to

understand everything about my situation—corrupt lawyers, a slow government. We kept nodding enthusiastically at each other's stories and complaints and I quickly sensed a connection between us. She told me that I was sure to get hired at the academy, especially with my prior experience teaching English. She seemed happy to meet me. I was certain we would be friends.

But, the truth was, Brenda and I had nothing in common. In fact, our false intimacy ended that very afternoon at the water dispenser. After the bell rang to signify the end of classes, I noticed that an illogical number of men stood in line to quench their thirst. And Brenda seemed to notice too, although she did not look surprised. In a matter of moments, Brenda forgot I existed. She smiled and leaned closer to the dispenser, laughing and speaking perfect Spanish with her students, touching them lightly on the shoulders, squeezing their trembling biceps with her playful fingers, her curly auburn hair nearly dipping into their paper cones.

When I was in elementary school, a friend of the family, Cathy Scott, used to buy my sisters and me clothes at local thrift stores and then sell them to my mom. Often, Cathy Scott came over to our house unannounced with her two ill-behaved boys who were our ages and wanted to marry us. Piling garbage sacks filled with clothes in the living room, she talked about her wonderful findings while we sat on the couch trying to avoid the penetrating gazes of the Scott boys, eager spectators to our fashion show. One by one, my sisters and I were asked to go in the back room, come out and show Cathy Scott how great her clothes looked on us.

I am still not clear why my sisters and I had to undergo these sessions with Cathy Scott. Maybe my mom, who had five children, felt the need to show friends and family she knew how to be thrifty. Even after she paid Cathy a little extra for her labor, she still saved a lot of money. Or maybe my mom felt sorry for Cathy Scott, who came over smiling shyly, her thin face mostly covered by a large perm, her petite frame staggering under the bags of clothes she hauled, asking us if we had a few minutes to try things on, talking about how she'd spent all day at Goodwill. Maybe my mom felt generous writing checks to Cathy Scott, praising her for her efforts, her thoughtfulness.

There were a lot of problems with Cathy Scott's outfits—problems that I was unable to articulate clearly as a grade-schooler when I stood for inspection in the living room and Cathy Scott justified missing buttons or explained the convenience of one-piece suits that snapped at the crotch. I'm not sure to this day if Cathy Scott knew exactly what she was doing to us, but she did seem to be immune to our discomfort. She didn't care about whether the pants we tried on were too short or whether the clothes were actually made for little boys. She wanted an excuse to shop and an extra check and this caused her to conduct her business ruthlessly. Although she had a soft voice and sad eyes, Cathy Scott seemed to sense the power she had over our mother, who motivated by guilt and pity, shrank in front of her friend's tiny but somehow dominating presence.

As a result of this relationship, I once had to model and keep bright orange pants that ended just above my ankles. Cathy Scott told me they would go perfectly with a pair of hot pink sandals. After I was dressed, she beamed at the ensemble she had created—an ensemble that would later be ridiculed by my entire sixth grade class who scoffed at the possibility that short pants were "in" as Cathy Scott had confidently asserted.

One of the myths that my husband Noé told me before we arrived in El Salvador in February of 2009 to apply for his permanent residency was that I would be a huge hit in his country. In fact, as we talked about living there until his papers were processed, he often warned me about how popular I'd be. All of the men would whistle at me, I'd easily get into any bar or club I wanted to, women would want to be my friends. Noé told me that I'd experience this popularity because I was white, had blond hair and blue eyes, and was a foreigner. I looked as though I had money. And he warned me against getting too full of myself, against forgetting that I was really just an average-looking girl, whose exoticism disappeared in the territory of my own country. Noé anticipated that El Salvador would boost my self-esteem to dangerous levels.

Although Noé's prognosis was full of warnings, I couldn't help but feel a little relieved, even excited that the place where I would be spending the next few years of my life might be one that was more welcoming than the public schools I'd attended as a kid. Even though at twenty-five, traumatic school experiences—those that began when Cathy Scott dressed me—were quickly becoming a distant part of my past, I still always felt nervous about meeting new groups of people where I would be noticed and judged. Having an edge on acceptance would be an advantage I'd never had and, although I remained solemn in my promise to Noé that I wouldn't be like the conceited white girls he hated in El Salvador, I also couldn't help but wonder what being pretty and popular would be like.

Expectations were high for Yohann Desveaux as well. An altruistic Frenchman who arrived in El Salvador in early 2009 to work in non-governmental organizations, Yohann felt surprised at the attention he attracted—attention that sometimes distracted him from combating poverty and discrimination. Yohann worked at the academy with Brenda, the same academy where I was eventually hired. He taught English and a few French courses to supplement his meager wage at an NGO. And there, at the academy, girls from wealthy families swooned over his philanthropic heart. This was not the reception he had received in Spain when he moved there to work on an educational project. And it was certainly not like any treatment he had ever received in France—just another potbellied blond, a heavy drinker, with an unpromising degree in social work.

In many ways, Yohann enjoyed the same popularity Noé had envisioned for me. Female students gave him their phone numbers and men asked to get drinks with him after work. One day at an open house for the language academy, our boss found a substitute for Yohann's classes and he was paid just to sit in the doorway with a suit on—a model to attract new students. Due to his appearance, Yohann was also offered various commercial gigs. He appeared on TV channels in Central America alongside other foreigners pretending to be Salvadorians. And Yohann, who had often scoffed at the United States' notion of superiority, who encouraged Salvadorians to buy local, appeared wide-eyed, brushing his teeth, washing his hands, and performing choreographed dance routines to jingles that proudly declared “American quality at premium value!” In one commercial, small American flags popped up repeatedly on the screen.

And yet, despite all of this attention, Yohann felt terribly insecure in El Salvador. While he had never been so popular, he had also never been so noticed. Just as people



complimented him and freely offered him their daughters, people also critiqued him, mocked him. This had never happened in France. When I met Yohann at the academy, I often saw him sitting alone in a corner of the school's rooftop cafeteria smoking a cigarette and rarely greeting anyone who passed. He told me he liked to be alone. In the classes I taught, women who were at first attracted to Yohann found themselves almost immediately torn. As he walked past the window of the classroom, enraptured gazes often turned to confused frowns.

The main problem with Yohann—the reason he couldn't quite capitalize on his foreign allure—was the fact that people thought he was gay. Often as he walked across the street to enter the academy, girls would cringe and cackle at the way he swung his hips and raised a limp wrist, ostensibly to ward off traffic. In a country deeply concerned with masculinity, men avoided being seen alone with him. Although they liked the fact that, with Yohann, girls looked their way, and although they enjoyed the treatment at restaurants they received in the presence of someone who looked like he “had money,” when they went out with Yohann, men were careful to accent their own macho characteristics. In addition to making louder, more deliberate comments about female passersby, they also raised their voices in disgust when Yohann excused himself to go to the bathroom and apply facial creams or when he asked someone's opinion on a new haircut.

In this environment, Yohann's insecurities flared. Whereas in Europe he had concentrated his efforts mainly on NGOs and helping his community, his interests focused a bit more inward in El Salvador. Believing that women rejected him because of his physical appearance, Yohann, attempting to solve the problem, fell even further away

from the Salvadorian masculine ideal. Before going out with friends after work, he insisted on going home to freshen up. I remember Noé and I waiting in front of his house for nearly an hour while he changed shirts. In photos, Yohann puckered up his lips and opened his eyes wide, believing such an expression made him look thinner. And, at thirty-two, Yohann also became terrified of looking old. While he had always supported the use of facial creams, Yohann spent more and more money on rejuvenation treatments, emerging from bathrooms with eyebrows raised expectantly, cheeks resplendent, waiting for us to tell him he looked “fresh.”

Chalatenango is a controversial region in El Salvador. It is an area of the country where women are renowned for their beauty, where people have light skin and green eyes. In fact, if people from Chalatenango have good luck or know how to play their cards right, in the city they can pass for someone with a lot of money, a foreigner even. But it is far from the city and Chalatenango is also a place where people live in poverty and have little access to education. The truth is that despite their light skin, most *Chalatecos* are given away by the clothes that they wear and the words that they use.

Before she went to Detroit and then was deported and looked for work in the city of San Salvador, before she became Judith, Brenda was a little girl growing up in Chalatenango. After I got hired at the academy, I got to know her a little and she told me more about her life. She explained to me once in secret that she was born on the floor of her grandmother’s house, and she said she hated noodles because they reminded her of the white worms that used to crawl in her feces when she was young.

But Brenda's Chalatenango past did not seem to cause her the insecurity that Yohann's femininity caused him. Instead, Brenda used her white skin and big green eyes to her advantage. Wearing American clothes paid for by the remittances her husband sent down from the U.S., Brenda told students she was from the city of San Salvador or even Detroit when she felt like it. But I also sometimes saw her claim her Chalatenango roots confidently. For example, once when we were at the beach with coworkers from the academy, Brenda, lying in a hammock under layers of sunscreen, became tired of everyone saying that she was boring, a "strawberry girl" as they say in El Salvador, who would never let herself get dirty, who didn't know about physical activity.

That afternoon, all of us stood around and watched as she ripped down bunches of coconuts from a tree and then used a machete to chop them up and pour out the milk faster than the huge, sun-burnt women with rough hands who vended on the side of the road. That day she let us see her hidden *coquera* past, a past that showed her strength, that made us come to her with empty hands asking for milk. And after this incident, Brenda's popularity soared.

As it turned out, Noé had greatly overestimated the positive reception I would receive in his country, the unchecked arrogance I'd develop from the glowing praise of Salvadorians. I learned about my shortcomings next to Brenda, an expert at being an attractive woman in El Salvador. Just as Yohann didn't understand the ultra-masculine expectations in his new country, apparently I did not fully capture the importance of adopting exaggerated, feminine fashions. At the supermarket, at the beach, even in their

own living rooms, women in El Salvador were *arregladas*, “fixed up.” Huge hoop earrings, high heels, tight pants, and face powder were essential to a successful look.

But although I obediently adhered to the strict dress code at work, buying high heels and dress pants and shirts, and although I had begun to put on a little more makeup before teaching classes and to wear earrings and necklaces, my students still asked me why they had seen me dressed in shorts and flip flops at the supermarket and why women in the U.S. didn’t wear any makeup—was it because they were athletic?

Noé tried to encourage me as I slunk home from work, confused by the critiques of my students who told me I looked like a boy, that I should buy a dress. I felt disheartened by the scarcity of the compliments I’d been promised. “You need to be more confident,” he told me simply, suggesting I tell them my style was fashionable in the U.S. And it was true that no one in the U.S. had ever accused me of looking like a boy. I had a short haircut and often wore sneakers, but I also put on makeup and dressed up to go out. These criticisms were new to me, and disappointing. As a child I had expected to be ridiculed in the outfits Cathy Scott had picked out for me, had dreaded going to school, but I had been looking forward to a successful reception in El Salvador, to being a popular trendsetter.

In June of 2009, Brenda arrived at the academy with a drastic makeover. Wearing new clothes purchased from the money her husband still sent and with freshly-straightened hair and blond highlights, Brenda casually pulled her students’ folders from a closet in the teacher’s lounge while coworkers gushed their admiration and surprise. “You were so beautiful before,” someone said, “but now...” And it was true. Brenda

looked striking. Dark eye makeup highlighted her big eyes and an excessive amount of lip gloss accented the natural pout of her full lips. Brenda's hoop earrings swung with each toss of her head and she walked effortlessly in platform heels to her class, taking her time, pausing to laugh and talk to students, running her fingers through her now blond hair.

Brenda's makeover came on a bad day for me. Unfortunately, just the day before, I too had gotten somewhat of a makeover—a new haircut. Only it did not receive the same reaction that Brenda's did. The place where I had gone to get my hair done had been recommended to me by an acquaintance from the academy. I didn't know her very well, but she said she knew a hairdresser who was more or less famous and did a terrific job, especially with short hair. It was worth it, she kept asserting, emphasizing again and again that this hair dresser, this friend of a friend, sometimes appeared on TV. Excited for something different, for a style that would earn my students' admiration and prove that short hair could be attractive, I told her I was interested.

The afternoon of the haircut, when I walked into the salon, I was surprised to see that it consisted of nothing more than an outdoor porch, connected to a cluttered living room, reeking of beauty products. In the dark red living room, which served as a waiting area, a woman, her orange hair wrapped in rollers, did not move or look up from her magazine. Around her, more magazines piled high in stacks on the floor and a dim lamp with green fringe stood next to a green velour couch. But while the woman's hair and the look of the living room gave me pause, the actual salon seemed downright dangerous. Apparently, there had been a recent flood. Deep pools of water covered the floor of the partly-enclosed porch and, dipped in those puddles of water, some grazing over the liquid

and some completely immersed, were electric cords for blow dryers, hair straighteners, and curling irons.

But any cry of horror that I may have let out at that moment was stifled by the appearance of the man who would be cutting my hair. Scissors in hand, emerging from the flood, he walked slowly from the light of the porch, to the darkness of the room. When I turned to see him, he was still only in half-light, his feet covered in a black puddle, an extension cord resting on his toes. He didn't say much, but just smacked his gum and raised his eyebrows, as if daring me to compete in a challenge he knew I would lose. As I stared at him from my position in the waiting room, I tried to decide what his hair meant for me: three or four-inch spikes that shot to the right out of the top of his head so that he looked like he was permanently leaning. The back of his hair, I would later see was a complete contrast—a smooth, long tail.

Immediately I knew that I should back out, go home and take a nap before work. Instead, I stayed, feeling awkward as one of two customers, still even hopeful that the claim that he was a genius had some truth to it. I mumbled that I wanted to look through some magazines first, please.

The haircut lasted about twenty seconds. After I had carefully picked out the style that I wanted in a magazine in the living room, agonizing over the accuracy of the picture, the man whisked it out of my hands and pushed me into a chair, smacking his gum and nodding, his eyes darting feverishly over my head, sizing up my hair. As he wrapped the towel around my shoulders, I lifted my feet out of the puddle surrounding the chair, my legs suspended in an awkward ninety-degree angle above the flood. In the moments before the cut I suddenly repented of my bold, trendsetting desires, and I

scarcely had time to shout out that I just wanted the same haircut that I already had, but a little shorter, please!

Immediately I could see why he had been such a hit on TV. This man didn't even bother to wet my hair. The twenty seconds passed in a whirl of flying scissors, scissors that he tossed from hand to hand, and twirled from finger to finger, all the while smacking his gum as though completely satisfied with himself. In fact, he was so confident that he wasn't even going to give me the chance to inspect his work. As soon as he finished, he turned me around in the chair and started taking my towel off. But, even in the midst of my terror I insisted on looking and so he wheeled me with frightening speed through splashing water, over to a three-way mirror. The results were crushing. To my dismay, in front, my hair was above my chin line, the shortest I had ever had it. The back, however, hung in an upside down triangle that reached down to my shirt collar—a smooth, long tail.

In the *colonia* where Noé grew up in the middle of San Salvador, everyone had a nickname. Most of the time these nicknames were drawn from physical attributes. For example, as a child, Noé had blond hair and light skin. Because of that, his family thought that he looked like a doll—a *muñeco*. To this day, everyone in his *colonia* calls him Ñeco. Later, when he let his hair grow out down to his shoulders, people thought he looked like a famous clown, Pizarín, and his brothers still call him this. But, although being called the name of a clown is not exactly flattering, there are nicknames that are much worse. A neighbor of Noé's is still called "Camel" because she has a hunchback, and one of Noé's ex-girlfriends who had a broad back was known as "Washboard Back."

His friends called his girlfriend before this “Cat Face.” And even outside of the *colonia* there were nicknames. Noé’s coworker who had one leg that was much shorter than another became known as “Stump Leg,” and a friend with a severe under bite earned the nickname “Dresser Drawer Mouth.” “Pineapple Face,” “Martian Head,” “Dwarf,” and “Vulture Nose” were just some of the nicknames I heard over and over again in El Salvador. Openly, everyone said what they thought of everyone else. For a foreigner, this environment was cruel and scary, and with the wrong nickname it could be a harsh introduction into a new community, a permanent marker of your place and status. It was after my haircut that I received my first Salvadorian nickname.

Even without Brenda’s new hairstyle, mine would have not have received the approval I’d hoped for. However, next to her makeover, my haircut was a glaring failure. Students laughed and coworkers told me I looked like Ramona Quimby. Questions in class abounded. Why had I decided to cut my hair? What was that thing hanging down the back? Who was the girl with the blond, straight hair? Was she single? I fielded them as best as I could.

And then, slowly, I learned to respond when they called me “Rat Tail.”

As the months wore on, Brenda showcased a variety of styles and looks, always resounding successes at the academy. As her immigration papers were delayed at the embassy and her husband’s trips to visit her postponed, she seemed to become more and more fashionable, more interested in the attention she received from men. In fact, Brenda, always admired, quickly became one of the most popular teachers in the



academy. Students began requesting her to teach them. Even though Brenda didn't know much English grammar, our supervisors assigned her very advanced classes and students seemed generally pleased with the results of her instruction. As rewards, they invited her to accompany them to soccer games and movie theaters.

Soon, Brenda's popularity demanded a name change. So that her husband back in Detroit would not worry about her faithfulness and so that the remittances and immigration paperwork could continue without a messy divorce, she told me one day very practically that she had changed her name to Judith.

In 2010, Yohann Desveaux's greatest source of insecurity arrived in El Salvador. His name was Florent, he was French, and women loved him. What was so devastating about Florent's popularity, however, was that, unlike Yohann, he did not try to be popular. In fact, Florent seemed to go out of his way to impact the people of El Salvador with his apathetic attitude toward bathing, his aversion to fashionable clothing. After he got a job teaching French at the same language academy, Florent bought children's ties at a market downtown. They ended well above his belly button. He also boldly pioneered facial hair in El Salvador, with the growth of a long, unkempt beard. Most things Florent did seemed to be well-received by women. His eyes, a penetrating blue, were preferable to Yohann's brown ones. And Florent, dirty and crass, a man who frequented El Salvador's most famous strip club, Lips, easily met El Salvador's masculine standards.

While Yohann resented Florent, he also desired to learn from him. Under Florent's tutelage, Yohann attempted to become a womanizer. At restaurants or bars, he began to loudly declare his appreciation for various parts of women's bodies. And he

began going to Lips too. There, Yohann found women that were eager to be with him. These women were what Salvadorians called *descaradas*—barefaced. They had no shame, didn't bother hiding who they were or how they made their money. And he proudly invited them to dinners, beach outings, and birthday parties. But Yohann did not change his effeminate gestures or cut back on his extensive beauty treatments and, because of this, criticism persisted.

Yohann's behavior towards women, while ultimately unsuccessful, was in fact common. The thing about El Salvador was that, in addition to a general obsession with dressing well and always looking *arregladas*, the women in El Salvador seemed perpetually on display. Yohann's prostitutes may have been brazen and shameless, but the way in which men judged them was equally blatant and undisguised. It too was *descarada*. During the two years I ending up living in El Salvador, I felt more self-conscious than I had even as I modeled in front of the Scott boys. This self-consciousness prevented me from being as daring as the unruly, unhygienic Florent. As a white girl from Nebraska, I was doubly on display. Brenda, aka Judith, basked in this attention. I, Rat Tail, did not.

Judith and I, while never extremely close, quickly became uneasy acquaintances. In fact, after a year of working at the academy, she quit to become a full-time model. Occasionally I did see her. For a while she dated a dentist and showed up at the academy a few times to visit, proudly wearing a new set of braces. But modeling in El Salvador is connected closely with unofficial prostitution and Judith discovered that it was much easier to make money with a few old men than at the academy or with her modeling gigs.

She and I never spoke of how she earned a living. The modeling agency and the people she spent her time with were notorious for their involvement in prostitution and every time I saw Judith she had a new car. A few times she introduced me to her clients, telling me that they were her private English students and I felt uncomfortable, pretending to believe her.

Once, Noé and I ran into Judith at a movie theater. Excited to see us, she used the opportunity to ask if we would be willing to switch houses with her for a couple of weeks. Her husband was coming from Detroit and she didn't want him to see how well she was doing, she said. She was afraid he would stop sending money. And there were a few men who came over, "uninvited," she insisted, to her house and she was afraid they would come when her husband was there. Judith smiled at us in the darkness, her teeth already looking straighter and whiter. What did we think? Would we do it? I didn't know what to say. I was silent. And at that moment, even without the light as she shifted in her chair, scratched her knee, then coughed, I thought that I saw her at last—Judith, who was also Brenda, sitting forward in her seat, waiting for us to reply, her braces gleaming hopefully in the darkness of the theater.

## When it Touches You

My friend, Bea, called to complain that her fiancé Matt touched her too much. From what I understood, he did it inadvertently. They lived in a closet-sized apartment in Greenwich, Connecticut, where Bea's extra clothes that couldn't fit in the actual closet were stuffed under her bed in boxes. She had to share the small space with Matt's hunting equipment and boating gear, which he accumulated enthusiastically. And in the tiny rooms and narrow hallways, when Bea sat down on the couch to watch TV or stood in the kitchen and tried her hand at boiling eggs, sometimes Matt brushed up against her. This type of human contact—the goose bump-inducing, feathery touch of a fingertip, the awkward bump of a knee to her thigh, or the hot breath on the top of her head that left her hair slightly damp—frankly, made her sick.

When she lived in El Salvador, she'd been able to spread out on her queen-sized bed in her own room in the spacious house she shared only with her mom on the top of a hill on a street named after her family. It was at the bottom of this hill that my husband, Noé, had grown up, on a cracked, nameless street. And unlike Bea, for him, El Salvador had meant tight spaces—sleeping shoulder to shoulder with eight siblings on mattresses spread across the living room floor, crawling over bodies to urinate in cardboard juice boxes.

After Noé left El Salvador for the United States, he rented an apartment in Lincoln, Nebraska where he lived alone for years, until he married me. He took walks in parks, and drove for hours with his brother to small Nebraska towns where they repaired roofs, passing acres and acres of farmland. He was impressed by all of the wide open

spaces. But I could tell from the phone call that Bea was not. She felt claustrophobic in her apartment in Connecticut, where winter was swiftly approaching and she didn't have the money to buy a car.

When she called in early September, she'd only been in the U.S. for a few months, and Noé and I had just returned from El Salvador a few days before. Our conversation should have been a cheerful exchange between two friends who had arrived where we'd said we wanted to go, but on the other end of the line, I grunted encouragement as my head throbbed from allergies that seemed to bother me only in Nebraska. Noé and I were unpacking our clothes from two large suitcases and I could feel the mucus in my sinuses shift every time I bent down to pick up another shirt or pair of jeans.

Bea did stop talking about her new home long enough to congratulate me on Noé's visa, which we'd waited for nearly three years in El Salvador to get. As our neighbor and co-worker at the language academy where we worked together until Bea got a job as a lawyer, she had been a witness to nearly the whole, arduous immigration process we'd gone through. She knew how important it was for Noé to become a permanent resident of the United States, how we had gotten married in Nebraska and left our jobs and school to move to El Salvador and apply for his residency, and how after three years, we thought it would never come.

But now that it had come, I could not respond as everyone expected. Our good luck, the approval of Noé's papers, could not live up to the hype. I'd realized this as soon as I held the visa in my hand in our apartment in El Salvador over a half-empty pizza box—the remains of our celebration. A small piece of paper, cut unevenly, had

announced Noé's visa approval a few days before. That note, which I'd sworn I would never lose, was now thrown out with our paper cups and napkins. And now, I couldn't react appropriately to Noé's visa either. It was just a sticker inside his passport, slapped on in a moment, easy to peel off. The thin, hasty result of three years of waiting. But maybe my ambivalent feelings towards that sticker also had something to do with the loss that came with it. A secret loss I didn't want to reveal to anyone. The loss of my most faithful, constant enemy.

Without warning, the men and women at the American Embassy who I'd imagined held our lives flippantly in meaty, lazy fingers, had fit those same fingers into the holes of scissors, cut out a piece of paper, and then, a few days later, pressed a visa onto a passport page. They shook Noé's hand, congratulated him, and moved smoothly and suddenly out of our lives.

The enemy had vanished and now dreams and decisions we had conveniently put off for so long were in our unpracticed hands. We held them awkwardly. Three years later, they were unfamiliar, grown too large. There was no longer a number to call to complain either. Eric Ventura at the visa call center in Mexico would not hear from me again.

When we began the process, Noé had said he would work at a bilingual call center in the U.S., or on the roofs where he could make more money. But it was his fault that he hadn't learned to type in El Salvador, that his hands had grown smooth and un-calloused in a Salvadorian English academy. And my decisions, once postponed, were now ready to be made. My Nebraska senator would no longer accept desperate emails asking what the next step was. It was my fault that I did not know what to do. Soon I alone would

answer for setbacks in plans, for bad decisions, for not moving forward fast enough. Our enemies, when they were ready, had dropped us suddenly, throwing our lives back at us.

Now that we were finally back in the U.S. after three years away, it became very clear that we had little to show for our time abroad. All of our money had been spent, our jobs lost, apartment gone, my master's degree delayed. And Noé's old car that he had left for my family to use, now sat, useless, in my parents' driveway, a dilapidated picture of ruin. The first evening when we were in Lincoln, we walked outside to examine the damages. A large dent in the front fender marked the place where a careless neighbor had backed into it, a slew of naked wires were the only remnants of a robbed CD player, patches of rust had grown and spread over the entire exterior, and it had lost its power steering. We counted it as another loss.

But, on top of these losses, we'd moved back in with my parents and I was living in the room I had grown up in as a child. I felt as far away from my dreams as an eight-year-old. This room—a storage room of sorts for my mom—made me feel trapped. Guitars covered with dust, sat piled on top of one another under a low window. An old baby crib, a model recently declared unsafe for infants, covered an entire wall, and a giant dog kennel as tall as my waist sat in a corner. As I attempted to counsel Bea out of her own claustrophobia, Noé and I stuffed our clothes into the one closet in my mom's house that was not filled with sleeping bags, old wedding slips, my grandpa's floral paintings, or old prom dresses. When our clothes didn't fit, we threw picture frames, Kleenex boxes, and broken alarm clocks out of dresser drawers and wadded up our underwear into tiny balls alongside doorknobs and empty flower vases.

But Noé still felt more confident than I—still believed in our dreams, had faith that cluttered closets would be cleaned. As he discussed the possibility of dismantling the crib with my mom, Bea continued to bemoan the close quarters she shared with Matt. While she talked about boredom, expensive haircuts, cleaning bathtubs, and the complicated process of applying for a fiancée visa in the U.S., I couldn't help but think of the expression I had heard over and over again in El Salvador—*cuando te toca, te toca*. Literally, this means “when it touches you, it touches you,” although people also say, “*te toca*” in card games when they want to say that it's your turn. Mostly, this expression is used for very negative things. Often death. It could be used, for example, to console widows of men who have been killed by falling coconuts, or simply to comfort young people who prematurely bald. I always imagined that it meant that someone touched you on the shoulder and told you something like, “It's your turn to die from a falling coconut,” or “It's your turn to have a receding hairline at twenty-two,” and people in these situations could rest assured that none of this was their fault—there was nothing they could do. It was just their turn. And I think now, that beneath that consoling message is also another message. I think when people tell you *que te tocó*, what they are also saying is to tighten the muscles in your gut, to take the blow, to suck it up.

Bea self-identified as “not really a nice person.” She had been spoiled, was used to getting everything she wanted, and to a *muchacha* doing her laundry and dishes for her. She had gone to a very expensive school where she learned perfect English, but in her youth preferred going shopping in Miami or on skiing trips in Colorado instead of studying. And bitterness was also added into the mix—she'd been cheated on in a former



marriage ten years before, when she was twenty-three. Bea knew about revenge—had punched people in their faces and made them bleed, put bananas in exhaust pipes, and stood on desks in offices to call other women whores. I think it was to her credit that she recognized immediately that Matt was much too nice for her.

They met at a wedding in Nicaragua in 2009, two years before she moved with him to the United States. Bea told me about him in a mall in El Salvador over lunch, describing him as a Ken lookalike with a gap-toothed smile and red hair. He thought she looked like Eva Mendez without the mole. Their courtship consisted of a series of extravagant vacations. They stayed in hotels and resorts in Central America, Miami, New York, and Connecticut, where Matt was from. It wasn't long before they began planning their marriage.

From what I can remember from our conversations, Bea was alternately very excited and terrified about the prospect of quitting her job and living in the United States in what she described as “Matt’s closet.” She knew that getting a job would be impossible for a while as she would have to apply for permission to work in the U.S., and she balked at Matt’s idea of volunteering to help translate for Latino immigrants at a health clinic. As much as she wanted to help them in theory, she said she was afraid they might bring bad luck—attract poverty to her life—especially at a point when, for the first time, her economic situation would be precarious.

I remember sitting in her “library” where she often loaned me books. Bea opened up her arms to indicate the size of her house and asked me if I thought she should give everything up. After all, Bea was a lawyer in El Salvador with a famous last name, the niece of a former president. In the United States, her degree would count for nothing and

no one would be able to pronounce Rosales. “In Greenwich, they’ll all think I’m the maid,” she said, chewing on her lower lip.

Over Christmas of 2010, Bea had an inkling that Matt was going to propose to her and she seemed ready to say yes at the time. He had dropped some hints, she said, asked for her ring size, talked about job prospects she could look forward to after getting her work visa. But the day of her flight to visit Matt in the U.S., Bea, whose mind should have been filled with thoughts of impending matrimony, with tender images of Matt smiling, gap-toothed, over a ring-box, was instead enticed by one of the hundreds of *pupuserías* on the way to the airport. Soon, almost involuntarily, Bea found herself pulling off the main highway onto a narrow, dirt road, driving through a loud, convincing throng of women in aprons, seducing her with loving endearments—*venga chelita, corazón, amor*—inviting her to taste their secret blends of *loroco* and cheese.

Here, among the tantalizing rows of *pupusa* stands, the steady, expert cajoling of middle-aged women, Bea’s decision-making skills faltered. She succumbed. In the *pupusería*, as Bea dipped rice tortillas in salsa, sucked greedily on her fingers, and sipped *fresco* from a colored straw, she forgot the plane for a moment. Even Matt for a moment. Her heart strayed and she gave herself wholly, wildly, to a pile of *pupusas* on waxed paper.

And that was how she missed her plane. But to be fair, although Bea was a few minutes late to the airport, other forces also worked against her, ruining plans for a proposal. That afternoon, a huge snowstorm in the U.S. caused other potential flights to be delayed. And it was then, at the airport, her plane gone and stomach full, that Bea

remembered her love for Matt—too late. In fact, it took large amounts of money and three days for her to arrive in New York, where she and Matt had planned their special Christmas vacation.

There, she found him unusually sullen, unsympathetic to her *pupusa* story. Also, as it turned out, he had arranged for a limo to pick her up from the airport three days before and had meant to take her to a Broadway show. In all likelihood, he was going to propose. But, after Bea's late arrival, Matt had no intention of making such a romantic gesture. Instead of a ring, he gave her a bracelet with a little heart on it, dangling from a chain. Rather than express a sentiment of his love and commitment to her, it said something like "Property of Tiffany's."

Bea's thinly-veiled disgust was not lost on Matt and he soon felt guilty for his thoughtless gift. Later that day, he apologized for the bracelet, said he could see she wasn't "that excited about it," and seemed to want to move on, to attempt to enjoy the rest of his vacation. But, in yet another misstep, Bea understood his apology to mean that she was free to laugh and make fun of the bracelet publicly. That afternoon, Matt walked in on her while she was texting her friends back in El Salvador, commenting on the tacky gift. They were not on speaking terms for the rest of the day.

It wasn't until a few days later that Matt, never able to sustain anger for any long period of time, bought Bea a crumb cake while she was still asleep and placed it lovingly by her bedside. Now, if Bea would have thought for any length of time about the gift of the crumb cake, she may have concluded that it represented Matt's attempt to make peace; that it meant he'd been thinking about her. She would have understood that it expressed his desire to take care of her, to make her happy. But when Bea opened up her

eyes that morning, instead of reading deeply into the crumb cake, attempting to understand it in any symbolic way, she simply took it for what it was. She just saw a crumb cake. And she did not like crumb cake.

At first, Matt seemed fine with this, unfazed as she rejected it through a yawn. When he informed her that he would just eat it later himself, she rolled over and went back to sleep, peacefully unaware of any damage that may have been caused. However, the next morning while Matt was still in the shower, Bea woke up hungry. Before her across the room on a coffee table sat the brown paper bag, still folded over at the top, with the rejected crumb cake inside. The temptation was too much. In the early morning pangs of hunger, fate had ripened her for another mistake. Bea's mouth was still full when Matt stepped out of the bathroom, very hungry. "Where's the crumb cake?" he asked.

Needless to say, the Christmas vacation did not go so well. When Bea returned, she told me that she was certain that she loved Matt, but was just as certain that they might be incompatible. She wanted to know more about passive aggression and how prevalent it was in gringos. Since I was white and passive aggressive myself, I told her it was very common.

But Bea didn't have time to thoroughly investigate passive aggression or to decide whether or not she could live with it. There were events in the spring of 2011 that prepared Bea to give up everything and move to Connecticut. Gang members who had recently infiltrated her neighborhood painted graffiti twice on her door—signs she immediately painted over each time. With her elderly mother often at church events or

asleep, she began to feel frightened to be alone in her house. Late one evening before she went to bed, Bea called me to come over and keep her company, and we stood on her porch in the falling dusk to talk about her options.

Noé had always pointed it out to me, but I noticed it especially that night as I stood with Bea—potholes in the road, fallen tree branches blocking the way up Bea's steep hill, stray dogs, drunk neighbors walking around shouting, graffiti on the trees, lights out in the light posts—Bea's street that carried her father's name was not what it had been. And aside from an old man with long white hair who sat, drunk on a tree stump below her bedroom window making circles in the dirt with a long stick, she had no security.

I realized that night as Bea moved her bed so it was not so close to the window, the burden of lingering expectations of wealth. I saw Bea and her mom living in a house that was too big for them in a neighborhood that was falling apart. They survived with credit cards and what was left of Bea's father's inheritance, refusing to leave the street that bore their name. But now, maybe Bea would have to leave, not just because she loved Matt, but because her home was changing, shifting out from under her. And like so many of her countrymen who had so much less than she did—like Noé who had left seven years before—she was going to have to leave before she was ready, before she was sure, before a proposal even—just because it had touched her.

It touched us one late summer afternoon after I ordered pizza in El Salvador. When the doorbell rang, Noé opened it to find a man standing behind the pizza with a visa packet in hand. I ran for a pen and we signed for the envelope, full of instructions, a

brochure welcoming Noé to the U.S., and his passport, sticker added. Feeling the need to celebrate, we invited the pizza and mailman in and they quickly carried slices of our pizza away on napkins. Alone, Noé and I felt suddenly awkward with our packet. We opened it, said “wow,” and smiled. We had no idea what any of this meant. After leafing through the welcome brochure and studying Noé’s face on his visa, squinting eyes and double chin, I grabbed the TV remote. We ate our pizza silently as I flipped through the channels.

I wasn’t ready for Noé’s visa to come, although the tiny piece of paper had promised it. I missed my family in the States and wanted to finish my degree at the university, but Noé and I had become settled in El Salvador. We lived in a guarded community where we could walk around at night, and I’d gotten a job that I loved at a language academy, teaching English and training other English teachers.

But there were other things too. In El Salvador, I had nicknames—*Chele Cuca Macarrón, Chave, Chalateca, Heidy, Bicha Fresona*. I went dancing in El Salvador, drank *fresco* out of plastic bags, ate beef soup for lunch, and played soccer on the beach. My migraines and allergies had disappeared. In El Salvador, on Sunday evenings, Noé and I drove up the mountain to *Los Planes* where the air was always cool. We drank hot chocolate with cinnamon and looked out at the whole city of San Salvador. And, most importantly, we were never alone. Every day friends called us, asked us to go out for a drink or *pupusas*. If I wanted to, I could always be talking to someone. Even complete strangers, security guards, street performers—everyone wanted to know how everyone else was doing.

Noé would miss these things too, but he had more confidence that once our lives were back in our hands we would be able to mold them into something better. In the end, I was the one who cried when we left—too quickly—on a Saturday night at the end of August.

The day had been stressful. We couldn't get everything in our suitcases. The ten pounds of candy Noé's sister had given us to take back was too much and we frantically gave as many pounds of it as we could to security guards and neighbors. Late in the afternoon, Noé announced that he hated the cheap t-shirts I'd bought at the market for our nieces in Lincoln and drove down to the mall to buy better souvenirs.

At eight o'clock, we sold our car to Noé's brother and then, an hour before our ride to the airport was due to arrive, we walked down the street for some last *pupusas*. I remember thinking that after dinner we would sit and rest for a while in our apartment, look things over, contemplate leaving. But just as we were paying for our *pupusas*, our ride pulled up—a good fifteen minutes early. I had no chance to say goodbye or even look around. The men there to help us move were devastatingly efficient. In five minutes, everything was loaded from our apartment, what didn't fit was thrown in the dumpster, the door was locked, and we were on our way.

We left our home in a rundown pickup, with an abnormally small cab. I attempted to close the passenger door numerous times before succeeding, and by then I was almost entirely on Noé's lap, my thighs squished to half their normal size. Behind us, two men rode in the back with our large luggage. On the forty-five minute ride to the airport, with my whole weight pressed against the rattling door, I imagined my body flying out onto the highway at any moment, crashing fatally against the trees on the side

of the road. This fear did a lot to distract me and almost thwarted my intention to weep quietly in the darkness. But in the tiny, squeezed space, the tears still fell straight and fast. Only Noé saw and pressed his hand onto mine.

At the airport, our driver quickly jumped out of the car, leaving the engine running. Noé nudged me to hurry up and, when I pulled the handle I fell out suddenly, stumbling forward, barely preventing myself from landing face-first on the pavement. Without ceremony, the men threw our luggage out of the back of the truck and barreled away, eager to get back home and off the dark highway. There were no goodbyes. No promises to keep in contact. Because it was too late to travel safely all the way out to the airport, no one we loved had made the trip. Alone, we picked our suitcases off of the pavement and wheeled them inside. El Salvador had spit us out.

Bea left El Salvador in July—two months before we did. She waited as long as she could before she said yes to Matt’s marriage proposal in June on a lake in Connecticut. Bea would start a process similar to our own. After she got married, she would have to turn in papers and wait for up to two years before receiving her residency, before receiving permission to return to her country. And so, despite the sudden rise of gangsters in her neighborhood, Bea still showed up sobbing on my doorstep one Sunday morning three weeks before she had to leave for the U.S. and, doubled over, sniffing, cried out, “I can’t leave!” I didn’t know what to say. The shock of seeing Bea cry left me speechless. “How did you do it?” she asked, hiccupping. “Look at you. You don’t even have any furniture! Why did you come here?”



But as I poured orange juice and sat crossed-legged next to Bea on the floor, I knew no insight to give to her story—a parallel to my own. It was a simple story. We had done nothing except fall in love with people across our borders. We'd written the facts of ourselves on government forms and turned over these distilled versions of our lives into unseen hands. Now we waited for things to happen. We waited for it to touch us.

Shortly before Noé and I left El Salvador, Noé's best friend in Nebraska, Gerardo, called him and asked him to be the best man in his wedding. He told us that he was going to Colorado to get married to a girl he'd met a few years back while we were in El Salvador. She was an American, even looked a little like me—skinny with dirty blond hair, fair skin, and light eyes. Her name was Jessica. A Labor Day wedding, it would be our first weekend back in the U.S. and at that moment the arrival of the visa seemed very timely. We agreed to go to the wedding with Noé's brother, José, who lived in Lincoln.

The night before the wedding, Gerardo stayed up talking to Noé, José and me in the cabin José had rented. From what I could tell, he didn't seem to be that excited about getting married. In fact, when we had seen him with Jessica that afternoon, he acted indifferent towards her and extremely uncomfortable with her family. That night he told us that, as someone not particularly interested in higher education and not having studied in the U.S., he felt a bit intimidated. Jessica's family, he said, was made up chiefly of high school and middle school teachers. He told us that her parents played trivia games at the lunch table, quizzed him about U.S. presidents, and that Jessica's twenty-two-year-old brother, C.J., was very much into dinosaurs.

When we asked what he loved about Jessica—why he was willing to live with her family—he said that she was a good cook and enjoyed outdoor activities, which he really admired. But what Gerardo really wanted to talk about the night before his wedding was El Salvador, the country that he hadn't seen for nine years—since he was seventeen. It was a place he couldn't go back to because he was considered a temporary refugee by the U.S. and his only hope of changing his status was Jessica's willingness to go through an immigration process with him that might entail living in El Salvador for a while. He said bluntly that he wasn't sure at this point if their marriage would survive such a journey. Jessica wasn't used to living in third world countries. But going there was his dream anyway.

By the end of the night, Gerardo seemed more and more nervous. "I won't be able to end this by just breaking up with her if it doesn't work out," he kept saying, drinking shots of tequila and eating through packages of crackers and cheese. But José had had enough of Gerardo's uncertainty. He pulled out a pillow and blankets and threw them on the couch in the cabin's living room.

"Too late," he said.

At the wedding, Jessica looked radiant and excited. Confidently, she held Gerardo's hands and nodded and smiled at him to recite the vows she'd asked him to write in English and recite from memory. Gerardo's eyes were closed tightly, his lips pursed as though he were bracing himself for something very painful, or getting ready to vomit. He said his vows quietly, haltingly. But Jessica recited poetry in the heavily-accented Spanish she had learned at the university. With the dramatic flair she had

perfected as a theater major, she didn't blush as she compared him to a lion and then the stars.

After the wedding, Gerardo called Noé to see what we were up to—what we had planned for the day. Then, later on his wedding night at eight thirty, he called again to see what our plans were. At seven the next morning, he called and was disappointed to hear that we were heading back to Lincoln. He has been calling Noé daily ever since.

In late September, Bea got married to Matt in a civil ceremony in Connecticut. She wrote that she was happy and ready to begin a new life. Bea's note to me did not mention earlier hints of claustrophobia. Instead, she said that she didn't let herself think about her past. Only once had she let herself envision her old room in El Salvador, and then, she'd allowed such weakness for only a few minutes. "I have strong survival skills," she told me. And, over the months as we continued talking on the phone and writing, I could see that that was true.

A month after arriving in the U.S., Bea confessed that she'd spent an entire day without eating because she was afraid of trying to work the electric stove. And after four months in the U.S., she'd still had no luck finding a job. Her flyers advertising Spanish classes had resulted in nothing more than numerous phone calls from Greenwich housewives looking for nannies. When she became desperate enough, Bea accepted one of these nanny jobs only to find herself quickly fired after the mother realized she didn't have a driver's license. Bored at home and eager for extra cash, Bea participated in a flea market in October. There, she attempted to sell key chains with "little monsters" on them

that she had handcrafted for Halloween. But only a few preteen girls bought the little monsters and Bea spent more money than she earned on a scarf and hat.

And now, in November, the Connecticut days were shortening. Bea called to tell me that she sometimes rode through wind and flurries on her bike to a pharmacy just to see people. Only two children had shown up at her door on a freezing Halloween, and an early snowstorm had left her without power for a day, ruining the Salvadorian cheese her sister brought during a visit. Even Bea, I could tell, missed El Salvador.

But any discontent she had somehow did not turn to the desperation I sometimes felt. When I complained to Bea on the phone in November that I still didn't know what to do with my life, still lived with my mother, and missed my Salvadorian friends, she seemed irritated. "Did it ever occur to you that you just like to complain?" she asked and then proceeded to tell me about the exemplary attitudes of her clients at the health clinic she volunteered for. They were positive and had a good work ethic.

"I thought you didn't even want to work there," I said, attempting to stir up some complaints from Bea, complaints I'd heard earlier in September. "I thought they would attract poverty to your life." But Bea refused to say anything negative about her time at the health clinic. She loved it.

I realized then that I had misinterpreted Bea and her earlier complaints. I thought that they were the same as mine—of a serious, bitter variety—complaints that caused moping and bouts of depression. But Bea had somehow already been prepared for this disappointment. It didn't shake her. "I may not be completely happy here," she told me, "but that's life." And then she told me to "suck it up."

Gerardo and Jessica's marriage ended up not being valid in Nebraska. They were not legally married. Upset, Jessica told Gerardo to ask Noé and me to accompany them to another ceremony in front of the Justice of the Peace in Lincoln just a week after their first marriage. While I thought Gerardo might take the chance to reconsider, he decided to go through with it again. We attended. The judge went through with the whole ceremony even though he knew they had already been married. Gerardo sighed and rolled his eyes. He stumbled over the repeated vows. I missed getting a picture of their obligatory kiss.

Afterwards, we went to a Thai restaurant to celebrate their second wedding. We asked Jessica and Gerardo what their plans were for going to El Salvador—if they wanted to go through the immigration process so Gerardo could change his status or stay put in Lincoln. Jessica looked at Gerardo and smiled. “I really want to go,” she said. She told us that she wanted her future kids to know where Gerardo had been born and she wanted to meet Gerardo's family and see where he was from. Gerardo just shrugged and slowly picked at his Seafood Delight.

Noé says that Jessica reminds him of me when we got married three and a half years before. I think he means that at that time I believed I was in control of my own destiny, could make my own choices, fulfill my dreams, set my own timelines. I had always expected this freedom. Like Jessica, I believed my relationship with my husband would be guided simply by love and our personal choices. I was not prepared to give up my life to an impartial hand or to have it suddenly thrust back at me one afternoon over a

pizza box. But this is something that Gerardo, Noé, and even Bea were and are more prepared for. It is a preparation I am learning.

Now it is November and we have been in the U.S. for two months. Noé continues to look for a job and as we begin to make decisions that are ours again, he also cleans closets, paints my mother's bathroom, and pours caulking in her cracked driveway. Noé fixes what he can. And, hoping to find a better job, he begins to learn to type. Each night he places his soft fingers on the home row and reaches them up to find new letters, to form new words. He is preparing himself, feeling his way across the keyboard, spelling out his second language and waiting. For the next thing. An opportunity, a setback, a new enemy. Waiting for it to touch him.

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